

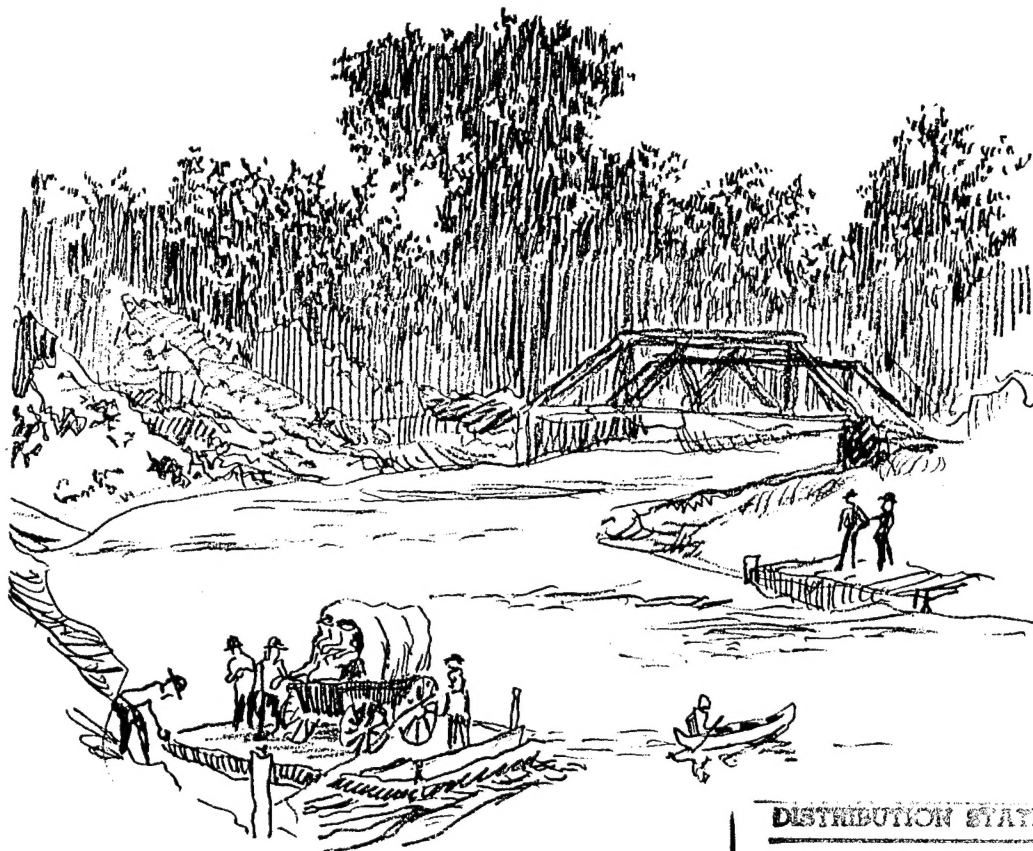


**US Army Corps  
of Engineers**

Kansas City District  
*You Matter — We Care*

# Blue River Channel Project Kansas City, Missouri

## Independence-Westport Road Crossing And Other Oregon/Santa Fe Trail Alternatives National Register Assessment



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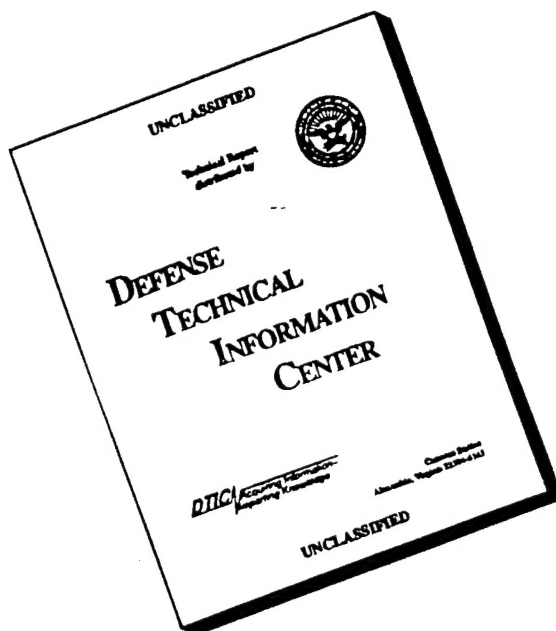
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BLUE RIVER  
CHANNEL PROJECT  
Kansas City, Missouri

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**INDEPENDENCE-WESTPORT ROAD CROSSING  
AND OTHER OREGON/SANTA FE TRAIL ALTERNATES  
NATIONAL REGISTER ASSESSMENT**

**CONTRACT NO. DACW41-93-P-0189  
Principal Investigator and Report Author**

**Sondra Van Meter McCoy**

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The study performed herein by the Contractor for the Corps of Engineers is authorized in the National Preservation Act of 1966, P. L. 89-665, as amended. Accomplishment of this work provides documentation evidencing compliance with the 1986 amendment to the National Historic Preservation Act.

Funds for this investigation and report were provided by the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers. The Corps may not necessarily agree with the contents of this report in its entirety. The report reflects the professional views of the Contractor who is responsible for collection of the data, analysis, conclusions and recommendations.



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## ABSTRACT

The investigation described in this report documents the local history for alternate routes of the Oregon and Santa Fe Trail crossings within the Blue River Flood Protection Project Area. The major focus is on the history and National Register of Historic Places assessment of the Independence-Westport Road Crossing, near 27th and Topping, in Blue Valley Park, Kansas City, Missouri. The Independence-Westport Road which leads down to the crossing on the west side dates back, in Jackson County documents, to 1827. The crossing at that site was already in use as a wagon ford. The bridge, built in 1836, is gone; nothing remains of the ferry operation, nor of the wagon ford. There is, however, abundant primary documentation about the existence of the crossing on the Blue River between the two segments of the Independence-Westport Road. The road was sometimes used by individuals or small groups of travelers destined for Santa Fe or Oregon. The site is also significant for its role in the Mormon settlement in Missouri and for being part of a Civil War battlefield. Other crossings of the Blue River are mentioned and located on maps within the Project Area, but none had the county support nor the use that the Independence-Westport Road and Crossing did during its historic period, 1827 to 1856. It is recommended that the Independence-Westport Road Crossing (Road and Crossing) site be considered for designation as a state and local historic site, and possibly as a National Register of Historic Places site.

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## INTRODUCTION

The proposed construction of the Blue River Flood Protection Project (Figure 1) will encompass the area designated as the Independence-Westport Road Crossing on the Blue River. The crossing is located at Blue Valley City Park, near 27th and Topping streets, in Kansas City, Jackson County, Missouri, and has been designated an alternate route of the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails. Primary research has identified this crossing as an alternate route; other alternate routes within the Blue River Project boundaries were also identified.

The Independence-Westport Road Crossing is identified in the 1981 National Park Service (NPS) report *Comprehensive Management and Use Plan, Oregon National Historic Trail* as being on an alternate route of the Oregon Trail and the first major river crossing on this branch of the trail. However, in October 1991, when the NPS designated portions of the trail in Kansas City, this site was not included.

This Blue River Crossing is also mentioned in the 1990 NPS report *Comprehensive Management and Use Plan, Santa Fe National Historic Trail*.

The proposed construction on the Blue River channel within the Blue River Flood Protection Project calls for straightening the Blue River channel near the crossing site and filling the present channel with earth. The connection between the Independence-Westport Road and its historic crossing on the Blue River would be eliminated. The new river channel would be some 275 feet to the east of the present crossing site. (Figure 1) Before proceeding with the modification of the Blue River Channel, the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers is required by Federal law to document the site and make a National Register evaluation.

Through an intensive documentary review and on-the-ground surface investigation, the principal investigator gathered sufficient evidence to: (1) develop a history and determine the actual use of alternate trails and crossings on the Blue River for the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails within the Blue River Project boundaries; (2) conduct photographic documentation to show the current physical conditions and appearance of the alternate trail routes and crossings; (3) and to make National Register evaluation of the sites based on the documentary review and the physical condition.

The study performed herein by the principal investigator for the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers is authorized in the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended. Accomplishment of this work provides documentation evidencing compliance with Executive Order 11593 "Protection and Enhancement of the Cultural







Figure 2. Contour map showing channel relocation limits at Independence-Westport Road Crossing

Environment" dated May 13, 1971, and Section 110 of the National Historic Preservation Act. This cultural resource survey was performed according to state and federal guidelines as outlined in: U. S. Department of the Interior, NPS, *National Register Bulletin*, 1982; Department of the Interior Regulations, 36 CFR Part 60: National Register of Historic Places; Department of the Interior, NPS "National Register of Historic Places and Comprehensive Statewide Historic Survey and Plans," September 21, 1977; U. S. Department of the Interior, NPS, "Archeological and Historic Preservation; Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines," *Federal Register*, Vol. 48, No. 190, September 29, 1983; and "Guidelines for Contract Cultural Resource Survey Reports and Professional Qualifications" by Michael S. Weichman, 1986.

The Independence-Westport Road Crossing is located in the East 1/2, Northwest 1/4, Section 13, Township 49 North, Range 33 West, Jackson County, Missouri. The road which goes down to the crossing is known as the Independence-Westport Road and because of its integral part of the crossing history, it will be included in most discussions of the crossing.

The review of documents, survey of the crossing site, and compilation of the history took place in 1993. Funds for this investigation and report were provided by the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers. The Corps may not necessarily agree with the contents of this report in its entirety. The reports reflects the professional views of the Contractor who is responsible for the collection of data, analysis, conclusions and recommendations.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING**

### **LOCATION**

The Independence-Westport Road Crossing of the Blue River is located about four and one-half miles southwest of the mouth of the Blue. Several geographical reasons could explain the choice of this site over other crossing sites. It was roughly halfway between the original Santa Fe Trail and the Missouri River, the river valley topography at the site allowed fording of the river and development of a road. The land on the east was level near the river, and on the west the road climbed the hill along a ravine. The latter provided a navigable route between the steep bluffs on either side.

### **BLUE RIVER PROJECTS, 1974**

When the U. S. Army Engineer District for Kansas City, Missouri, prepared a "Final Environmental Statement, Blue River Projects, Blue River Basin" in September 1974, they made a rather thorough study of the entire Blue River Basin. They contracted the Midwest Research Institute (MRI) of Kansas City, Missouri to assist them in this project. Therefore, both agencies will be credited for information derived from that study.

The history of the Blue River Basin projects dates back to 1970 when these projects were authorized by the Flood Control Act of 1970 (P.L. 91-611). The authorization provided for the construction of four lakes and channelization of the lower part of the Blue River. None of the lakes was built. The proposed modification of the Blue River channel would extend upstream from the mouth of the Blue River for 12 miles to near 63rd Street, Kansas City, Missouri.

### **CLIMATE**

The Blue River basin is situated in the temperate continental climate area of the United States. Temperature has varied from a high of 113 degrees in August 1936 to a low of -22 degrees in February 1889. The annual mean temperature is 55.6 degrees F.<sup>1</sup>

The mean amount of precipitation for the area is approximately 36.5 inches. In 1961, the most amount of precipitation recorded was 60.25 inches, and the least amount of precipitation recorded occurred in 1953 with 21 inches.<sup>2</sup> According to the *Kansas City Star*, May 13, 1930, the 1928 flood on the Blue River crested at 49 feet, or 28 feet above flood stage. The highest flood crest recorded by the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers in the Kansas City District, was the flood of September 13, 1961 which crested at 44.46 feet, 23 feet above flood stage at the gaging station at Bannister Road (95th Street), in Kansas City, Missouri.<sup>3</sup> The Independence-Westport Road Crossing is approximately eight and one-half miles downriver from Bannister Road.

## **PHYSIOGRAPHY**

The Blue River basin is situated in the Osage Plains physiographic section of western Missouri. This section is a maturely dissected gently rolling region with relatively wide stream valleys. The topography has been developed on Pennsylvanian age shales with interbeds of limestone, sandstone, and coal. Erosion has produced an expansive mildly rolling land surface with low, eastward facing escarpments along the outcrop belts of the more erosion resistant, westward dipping limestones.<sup>4</sup>

Limestone quarried in this area has been used for building stone, road construction, and other related industrial and commercial uses.

"Flood plain alluvium consists mainly of lean and fat clays with clayey gravel and sand at the base. Deposits range from 30 to 65 feet in thickness throughout most of the reach. . . ." The deep, dark, clayey and loamy alluvial soils occur along the main streams and creeks.<sup>5</sup>

## **FLORA**

Flora in the Blue River basin near the crossing consists of moderately dense timber forest of cottonwood, willow, elm, oak, ash and hackberry. Woody shrubs, vines, and wildflowers common to northwest Missouri are scattered throughout the woodlands near the river.

## **ENVIRONMENT FAVORS TRANSPORTATION**

"Historically, the growth of the Blue River basin has been linked to various forms of transportation because of the easy gradient of the flood plain. From the early days of the Santa Fe Trail, the area has been the central transportation hub of the Middle West."<sup>6</sup> Major railroads and highways traverse the basin, along with extensive local street networks. At one time a small airport operated on the east bank of the Blue River just north of the Independence-Westport Road Crossing.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **HISTORICAL INVESTIGATION**

The purpose of the investigation is to document the history of the Independence-Westport Road Crossing as an alternate route on the Oregon and Santa Fe Trail within Jackson County, Missouri. Proposed construction of the Blue River Flood Protection Project will encompass the area designated as the Independence-Westport Crossing of the Blue River, located in Blue Valley Park, near 27th and Topping streets, in Kansas City, Missouri. Although the emphasis is on the crossing near 27th and Topping, other crossings, which are within the Blue River Flood Protection Project Area, and which were also alternates on the Oregon and Santa Fe Trail, were also documented. In addition to an extensive documentary review, an on-site surface investigation and photographic documentation will assess current physical conditions and appearance of the crossing(s) and alternate trail routes. Information derived from this investigation will be used to make a National Register of Historic Places evaluation of the Independence-Westport Road Crossing as an alternate for the Oregon and Santa Fe Trail.

#### **THE INDEPENDENCE-WESTPORT ROAD CROSSING**

The now abandoned road going from Independence to Westport, with a crossing on the Blue River in the E 1/2-NW 1/4-S13-T49N-R33W, was once a main road in Jackson County. The Osage and other Indians groups may have been the first to use all or part of the route on their way to hunt buffalo on the Central Plains. Next, when the Santa Fe trade opened between the United States and Mexico, the route may have been in use by local residents and early travelers even before the county was organized. It became known as the road to the Shawnee Indian Agency until Westport developed as a trail headquarters. Travelers headed for Oregon and California used it in the 1840s and 1850s. County officials designated it a public highway--not merely a road going from one place to another--but the principal road going west from Independence, and as such it was open to all travelers. The term road is more appropriate than either highway or trail for the period under study. Officially twenty to forty feet wide, it was more than a trail, but still too rough to be a highway in the modern sense of the term.

For purposes of this investigation, the focus will be on the road as an Oregon and Santa Fe Trail alternate. In Jackson County, the Santa Fe and Oregon trails combined on the same route. They separated just over the Missouri border in Indian Territory (Kansas), with the Oregon Trail going west and north and the Santa Fe Trail southwest.

Travelers could cross the Blue River in several places. The fords or crossings upriver and farther south were relatively easy. As the river neared the Missouri River, the channel became wider and deeper and more difficult to cross. Various documents mention the following crossings within the Blue River Project boundaries.

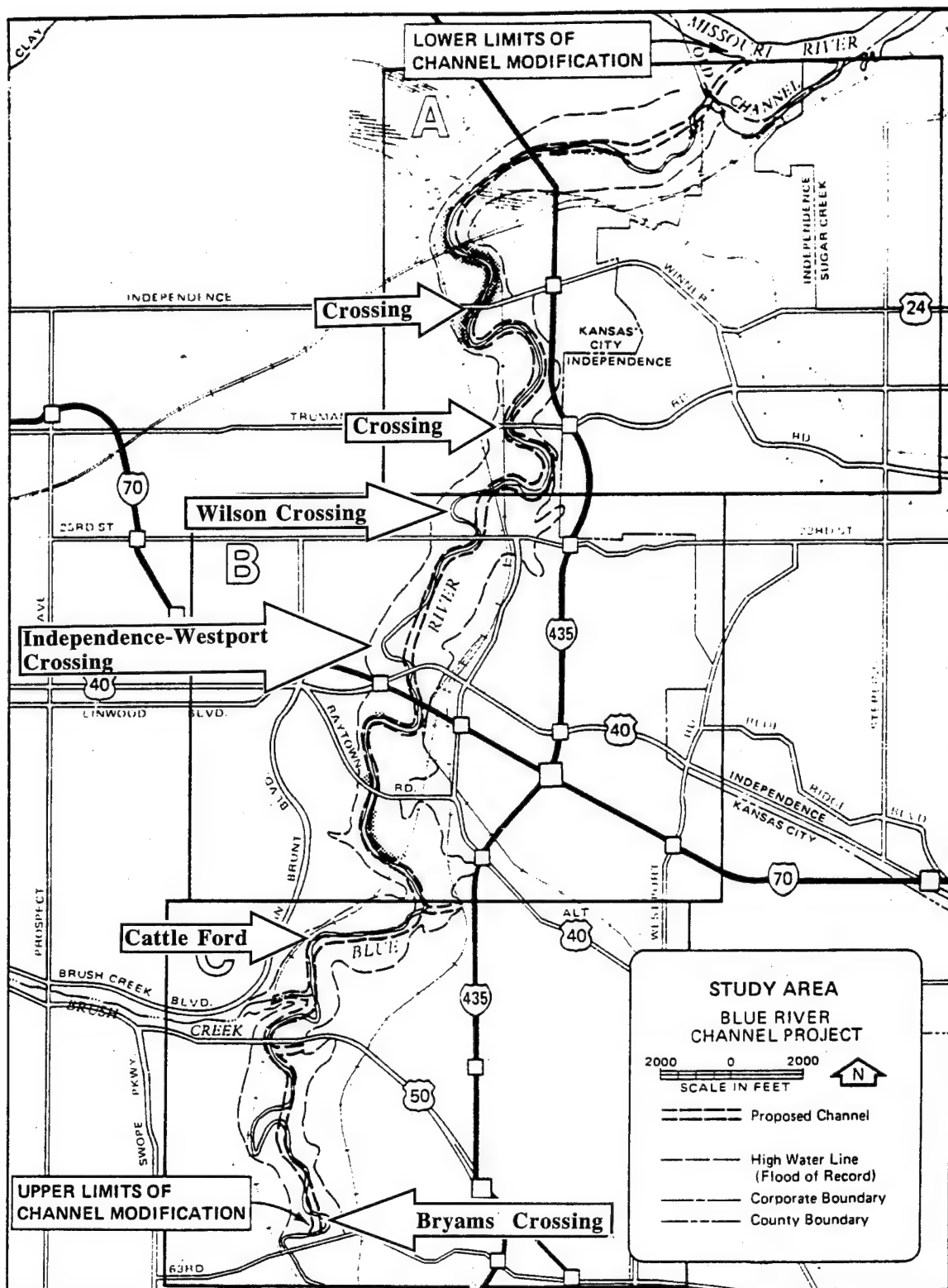


Figure 3. Crossings on the Blue River in the Project Area



The crossing under investigation is located in the E1/2-NW1/4-S13-T49N-R33W. Section 13 is shown as it appeared in an 1877 atlas of Jackson County, Missouri.

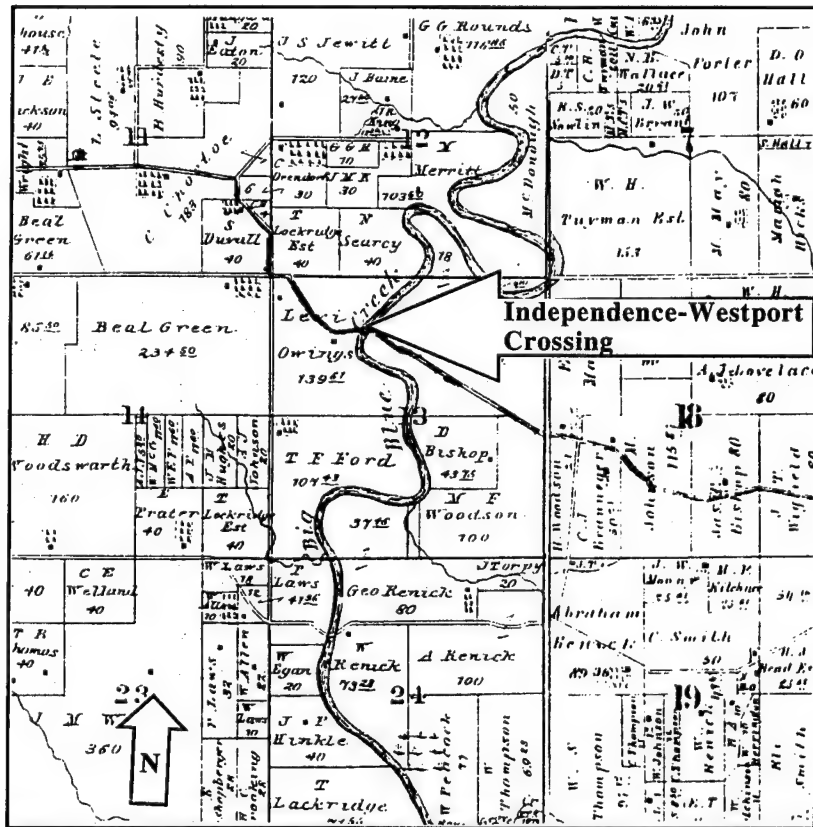


Figure 4. Section 13, Township 49 North, Range 33 West, the location of the Independence-Westport Road Crossing of the Blue River.

The Independence-Westport Road Crossing is identified in the 1981 National Park Service (NPS) report *Comprehensive Management and Use Plan, Oregon National Historic Trail* as being an alternate route of the Oregon Trail and the first major river crossing on this branch of the Trail. The report states "local experts claim that this short stretch of trail is the unaltered line of the Oregon Trail. This river crossing site and trail is the least impacted portion of the Oregon Trail to be found in the Kansas City metropolitan area."

Changes to the site include addition of a sewer line (mostly buried), some rock added to the road, and east bank alteration. In October 1991, when the NPS designated portions of the trail in Kansas City, they did not include this crossing as part of the Oregon National Historic Trail.

The Blue River crossing under investigation here received more consistent treatment under NPS studies done on the Historic Santa Fe Trail. This crossing was included in the 1988 preliminary report and in the 1990 report. The latter report, *Comprehensive Management and Use Plan, Santa Fe National Historic Trail*, stated that traders who went from Independence to Westport to outfit their wagons used this "less popular" crossing of the Big Blue River. (Called the Big Blue in the 19th century.) "The ruts going northwest up the steep hill west of the river are still visible at 27th and Topping Avenue." The report said there was no visible evidence of the crossing.<sup>7</sup> A review of the documents and a view of the site contradicts some of the findings in this plan. The hill is not steep, but rather a gradual incline of about thirty feet in over three hundred yards. The road and crossing, according to contemporary accounts was frequently used



by travelers; and county records document that the river was crossed by fording, by ferry and by bridge. The original bridge is gone; the abutments standing there are said to be of a later period than the one under study.

## MAP HISTORY OF THE INDEPENDENCE-WESTPORT ROAD CROSSING

### 19th Century Maps and Drawings

The first map of the Santa Fe Trail was prepared following the survey by George Sibley, Joseph Brown and others. In the following map (Figure 5), the route to Santa Fe is shown going through western Missouri and beyond. The trail began at Fort Osage (0 mile) in 1825 and exited about fourteen miles south of the Kansas River and Missouri confluence. The route was modified in 1827, when Fort Osage closed and Independence was founded. The Santa Fe Trail then passed through Independence. The map following showed an alternate trail passing west through Independence, crossing the Blue at about the present Independence-Westport Road Crossing site, then turning south and joining the main trail at New Santa Fe inside Missouri. Why this alternate was drawn on the map is not clear. George Sibley's journal entry for May 23, 1827, stated that the route should run south of Independence until it gets to the surveyed line. All the written information and tables of distances confirm this south, southwest route. (George C. Sibley's Journal and Diaries are printed in *The Road to Santa Fe*, edited by Kate L. Gregg.)

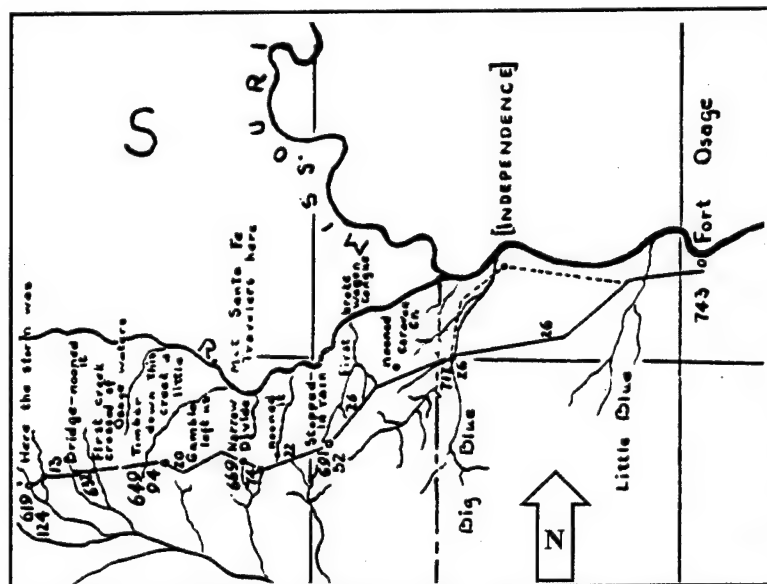


Figure 5. Distances in Missouri from Fort Osage west, drawn following the Santa Fe Trail survey in 1825 and 1827.

An 1841 map of Missouri featuring its roads showed one road passing through Independence in an almost straight line west to the border. The original trail to Santa Fe was not shown. This map lacked detail. However, if the Independence-Westport Road was featured as a major road in the county, it could be considered a main road and one that travelers used going to Westport, Indian Territory, Fort Leavenworth, or on their way to Oregon.

Another map dated 1852, was prepared by Lieutenant Israel C. Woodruff, topographical engineer, while on reconnaissance for the future Fort Riley site in Kansas. (Figure 6) The Santa Fe and Independence Road is the major Santa Fe Trail. Branches from that trail go up to Westport, the town of Kansas and east to Independence. The latter road was probably the Independence-Westport Road.

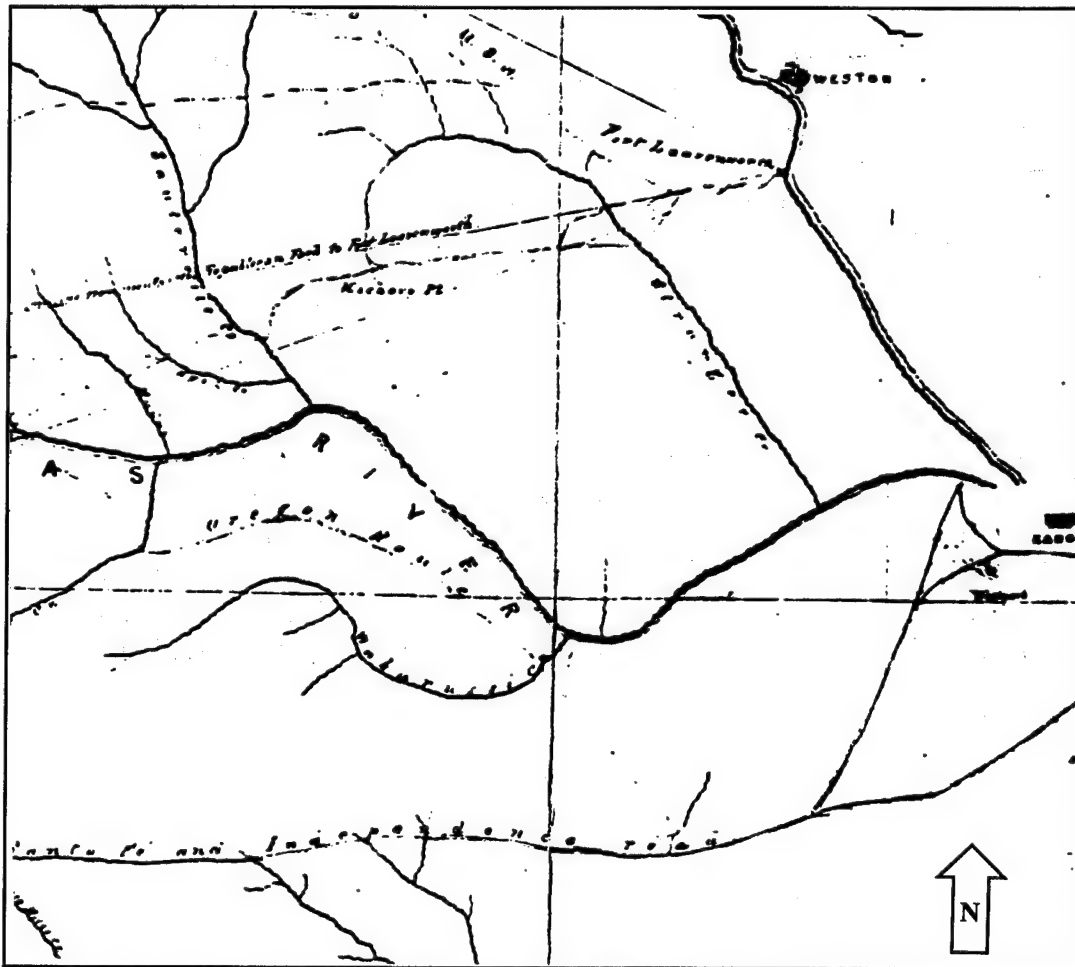


Figure 6. Map prepared by Lieutenant Israel C. Woodruff in 1852.

Source: Louise Barry, "Kansas Before 1854, Part 21, 1852," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, Volume 32 (Winter 1966), between pages 464 and 465.

## Civil War Period

One map of the Santa Fe Trail showed an alternate route as being farther north of the Independence-Westport Road Crossing, by about a mile and a half, near 15th Street (Truman Road). Historian William E. Connelley, in his "The Price Raid," a chapter in *A Standard History of Kansas and Kansans*,<sup>8</sup> has a map which resembles a map drawn in 1864 by topographical engineer, L. G. Bennett. This map depicted the Civil War battle lines along the Blue River. For some unexplained reason, they did not include the Independence-Westport Road and Crossing. Another map, "The Battle Field of Westport," drawn by William M. Lewis for the *Kansas City Journal*, August n.d., 1923, showed the Independence-Westport Road and Crossing which he also called the Santa Fe Trail. Lewis sketched the Union troops' positions on the west bank of the Crossing, awaiting Confederate troops. Other Union troops were north of the Independence-Westport Road Crossing, and also a mile south of the crossing. Confederates were expected to cross on the Independence-Westport Road Crossing on their way to Kansas City and Westport, but instead they chose an unprotected cattle crossing of the Blue. (Figures 7 & 8).

## Post Civil War

An 1877 Jackson County plat map, one of the earliest available maps of the county, shows the Independence-Westport Road Crossing in S13-T49N-R33W.<sup>9</sup> William Lewis drew in the trails on the 1877 Jackson County map (Figure 10). The close up of Section 13, (Figure 4) is also from the 1877 map. An 1881 map of Jackson County again shows the Independence-Westport Road and Crossing.<sup>10</sup> The only bridges shown on these two plat maps are the ones in Section 13, and another, an iron bridge in Section 34, same township and range.

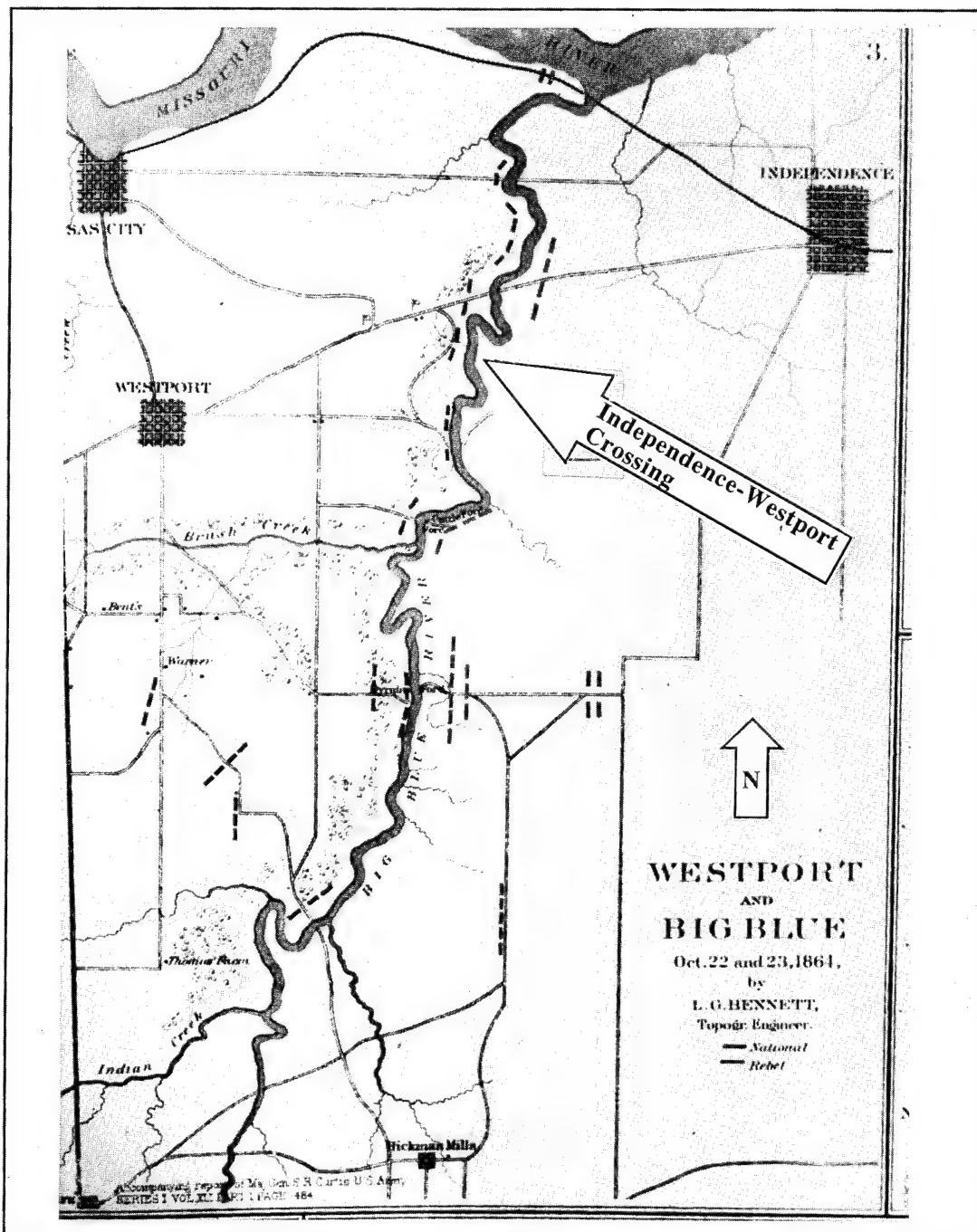


Figure 7. Civil War Map of Westport and Big Blue Battleground

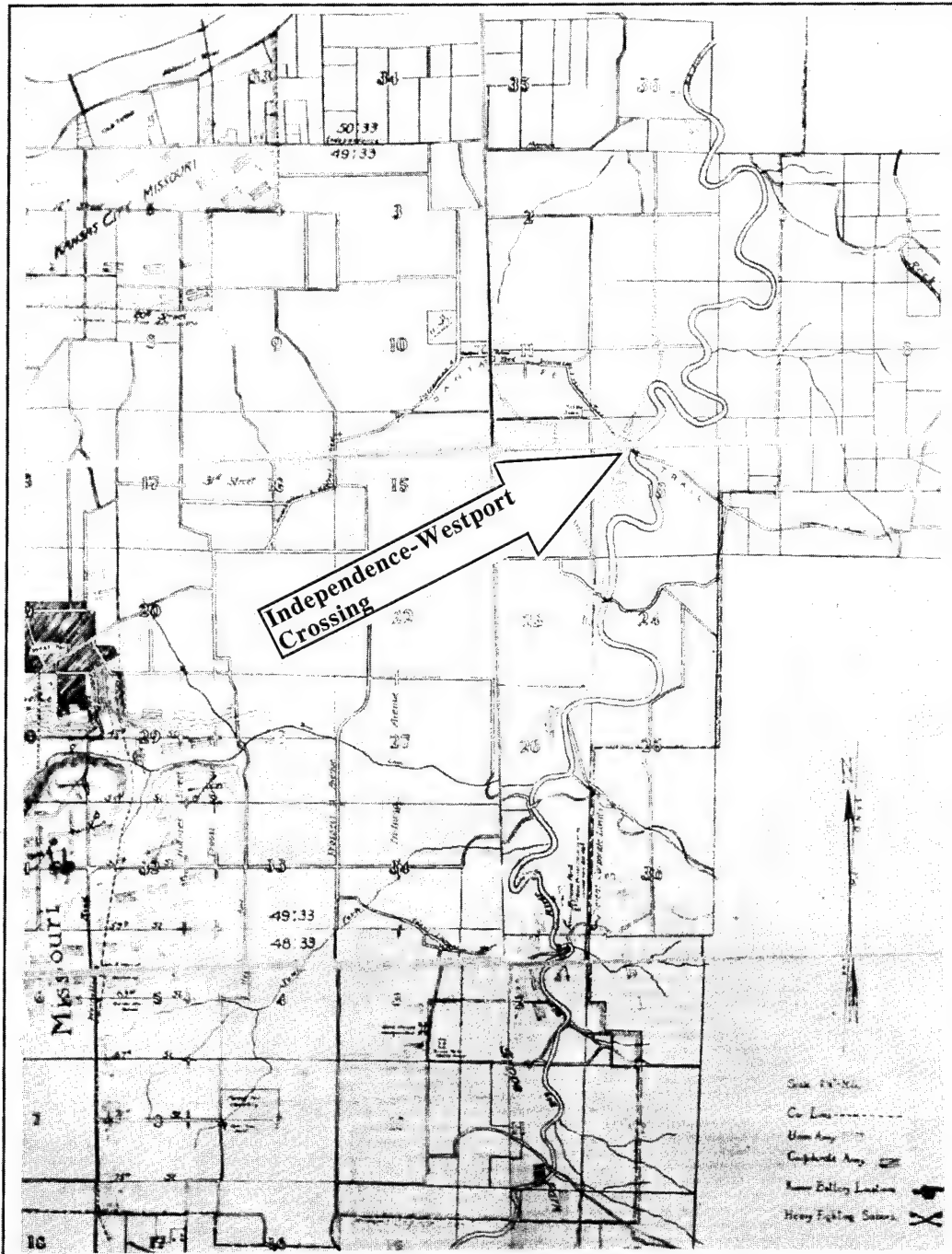


Figure 8. Civil War Map drawn by William M. Lewis, August 1923.  
The Santa Fe Trail/Independence-Westport Road is shown.

## 20th Century Map Documentation

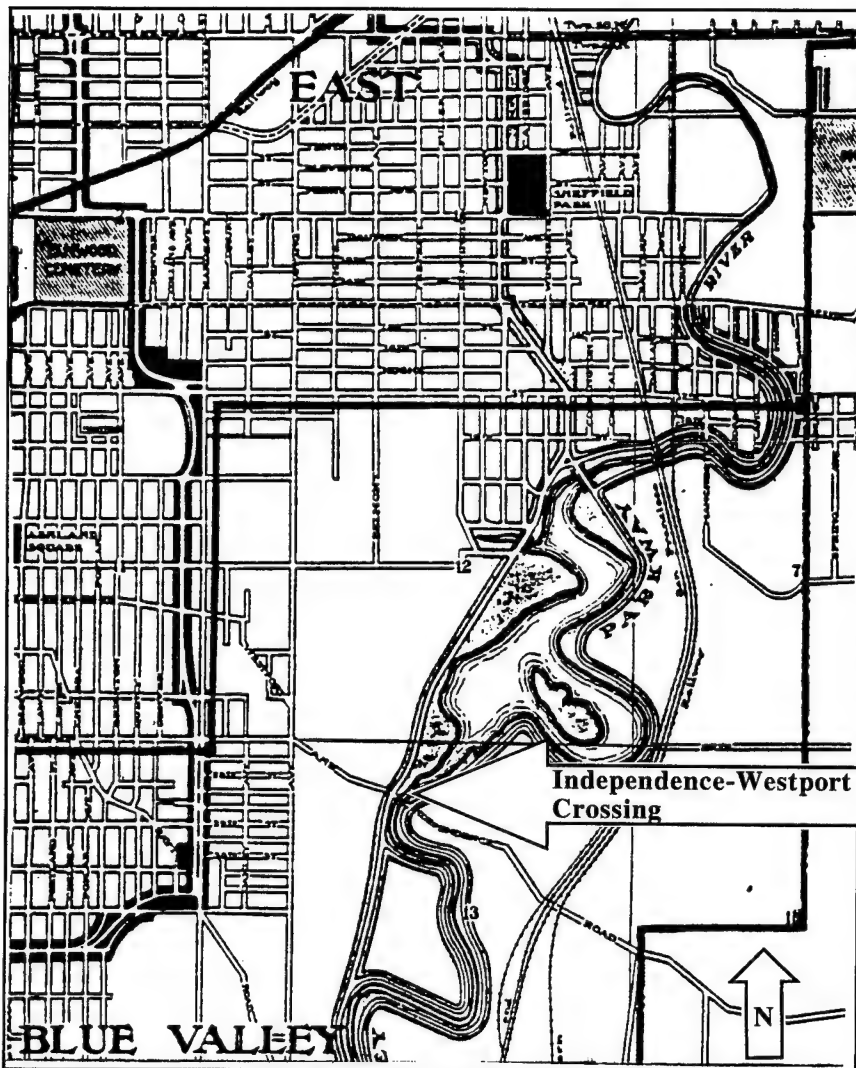


Figure 9. 1913 Map of Blue Valley Parkway showing the Independence-Westport Road.

By 1913, the crossing and the area including the Blue River north to a block south of 15th was designated as a parkway. The map (Figure 9) indicates that the river in Section 12 was wide enough to form a small lake. A road branches to the north and to the south on the west bank shortly after the Independence-Westport Road crossed the Blue River on the west bank. Residential development had reached the west side of Topping Avenue to within approximately 300 yards west of the crossing. A 1936 map of the Kansas City metropolitan area shows the Independence-

Westport Road crossing the Blue.<sup>11</sup> According to Ken Kaul of the Public Works Department, Kansas City, Missouri, the Independence-Westport Road was possibly used into the 1930s when it was replaced by U. S. Highway 40. This highway was constructed some two blocks upstream at about 30th Street. Although the old road could no longer be used as a road, it has been shown on city maps in recent years. The bridge which once crossed the Blue River on the Independence-Westport Road was mentioned in a *Kansas City Journal*, June 15, 1923 article: "only a few old wooden bridges, similar to the one at Westport Road, have spanned the Blue river. . ." The actual date of the bridge's disappearance remains unknown.

Early in the 20th century, persons fearing that knowledge of the historic Santa Fe and Oregon Trails would be lost became interested in marking Santa Fe Trail historical sites before they became completely paved over by city development. Among those interested in marking the trail routes were the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) in Missouri and Kansas. Following six years of research and investigation, which began in 1907, the DAR were ready to mark the trail routes in Jackson County with metal plates embedded in three-hundred to four-hundred pound stone boulders.

Initially, the DAR had difficulty finding information or a map marking the exact route of the trail. But with the assistance of Capt. W. Z. Hickman and C. C. Chiles of Independence, both of whom claimed having traveled over the trail many times, the DAR believed they were ready to "establish the true path of the route that was so nearly lost."<sup>12</sup>

In 1909, the Missouri legislature allocated \$3,000 to be used to buy and set trail markers. The DAR concluded that an alternate Santa Fe route from Independence entered Kansas City near 15th Street. After fording the Blue around 15th Street, they believed that the trail headed southwest to 27th and Topping, and from there jogged back north to 24th and Hardesty, west to Jackson, then southwest to Westport, according to an article appearing in the *Kansas City Journal*, September 6, 1925. The marker placed at 27th and Topping, where the Independence-Westport Road comes up the incline to intersect the corner of 27th and Topping, reads:

SANTA FE  
TRAIL  
1821 and 1872  
THIS CONNECTING LINK OF THE  
TRAIL BETWEEN INDEPENDENCE AND  
WESTPORT WAS ESTABLISHED IN  
1837

Their chronology is not quite accurate. The road was in use in 1827. Perhaps they are referring to the completion time of the bridge crossing.

A map drawn by William E. Lewis for the *Kansas City Journal*, August n.d. 1923, showed the Independence-Westport Road as also being a branch of the Santa Fe Trail. The *Kansas City Star*, November 14, 1948, carried an article by E. P. H. Gempel entitled: "The Three Major Routings of the Santa Fe Trail through Kansas City Area." The Missouri River to Westport Landing and down to Westport was one route. The Wayne City Landing through Independence and southwest over the original Santa Fe Trail was another, and the Independence-Westport Road was the third. (Figure 10)



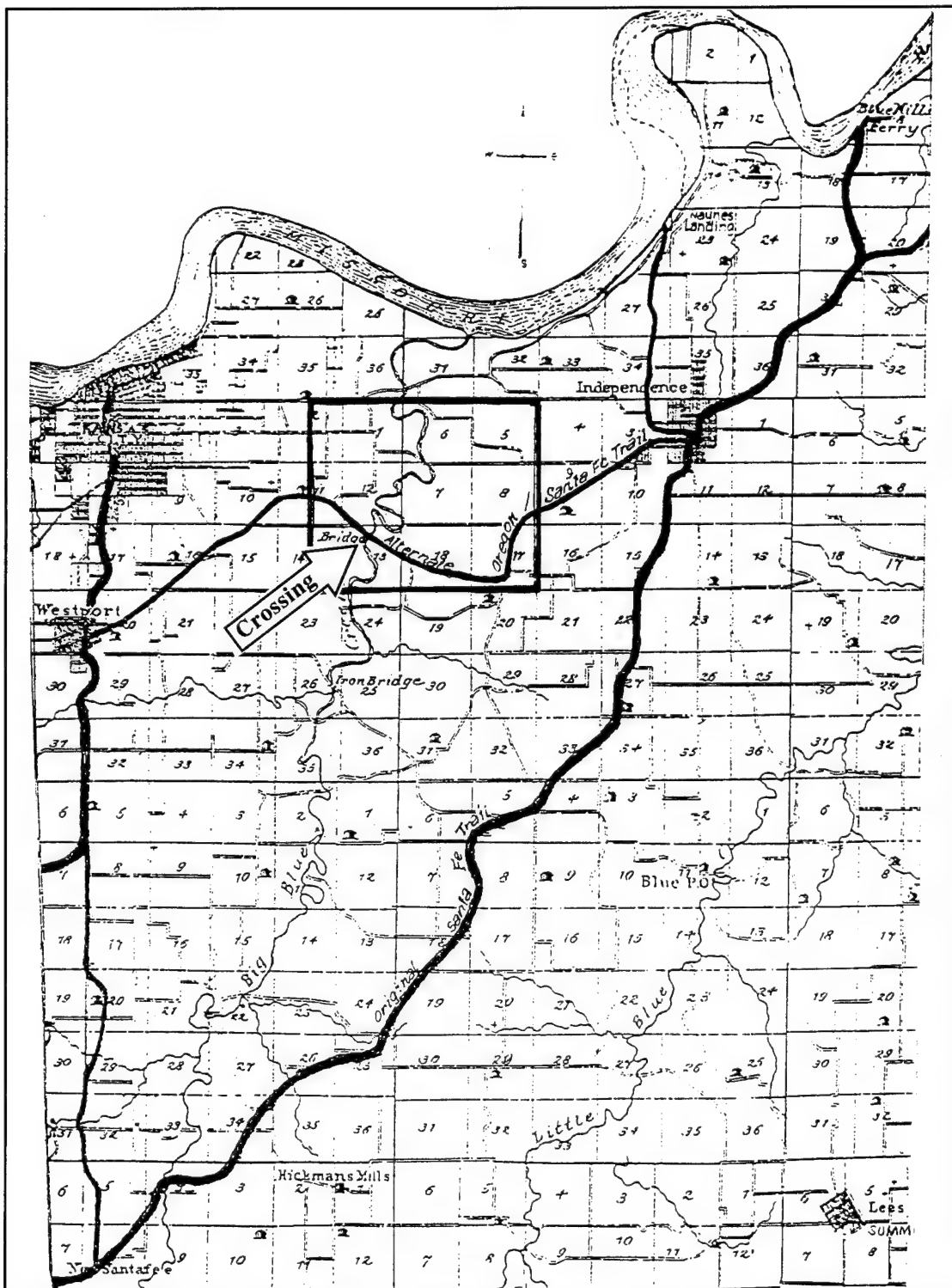


Figure 10. Map drawn by William E. Lewis for the *Kansas City Journal*, 1923. He drew the trails on an 1877 Jackson County township map.



Claiming to have "relocated the lost route of the Santa Fe Trail east of Gardner, Kansas," Dean Earl Wood, in *The Old Santa Fe Trail from the Missouri River*, documented the route using county records available in the Office of the County Clerk. He stated that the 1841 survey of the road showed it crossing the river at the old ford near 27th and Topping.<sup>13</sup>

Wood concluded that the Independence-Westport Road Crossing became important to the Santa Fe traders who brought their empty wagons from Westport over the Independence-Westport Road to pick up their merchandise at Blue Mills Landing on the Missouri River, four miles from Independence. (Blue Mills was the site of the first landing used in the trade serviced in Independence.) The route via 27th street was much closer than the original Santa Fe route, which crossed at the present 110th Street, at a place called Red Bridge Crossing. Wood observed that the road was busiest as an alternate Santa Fe Trail between 1832 and 1856. By the latter date, "all Santa Fe trade came to an end in Independence."<sup>14</sup>

Gregory Franzwa, in *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, stated that there were no vestiges of the Oregon Trail left in the Kansas City metropolitan area except for ". . . the west bank of the Big Blue River at the crossing of the Independence-Westport Road." Here "the Independence-Westport Road probably has more claim to the title of the Oregon Trail than the original Santa Fe Trail moving south out of Independence, if numbers of travelers is any criterion."<sup>15</sup> In fact, travel on the Oregon Trail remained heavy throughout the 1840s decade, while the Santa Fe Trail travel slowed due to the war with Mexico. Not all Oregon bound emigrants used Independence as their origination point on their journey west, though. Many left from Westport, Leavenworth, and points in Nebraska.

Franzwa walked the old abandoned road going from 27th and Topping southeast down to the Blue River. He was convinced that "The path is the original Oregon Trail." In 1972, Franzwa saw no ruts cut by the wagons, but understood that they had been visible until recent years. As for the river itself, it appeared to be "not especially deep" nor "very wide" at this spot.<sup>16</sup>

More recent studies done by the National Park Service in 1981, 1988, and 1990, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter also show the Independence-Westport Road Crossing on their maps; it is listed at #37 out of a total of 81 sites on the trail.

Big Blue River Crossing. The actual crossing site of the Big Blue River near old US Highway 40 is no longer visible. Traders who went from Independence to Westport to outfit used this less popular crossing of the Big Blue. The ruts going northwest up the steep hill west of the river are still visible at 27th and Topping Avenue.<sup>17</sup>

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **RESEARCH GOALS**

The duty of the principal investigator and report author was to develop a detailed, comprehensive history of the alternate crossing of the Santa Fe and Oregon Trail located on the Independence-Westport Road near 27th and Topping at the south end of Blue Valley Park in Kansas City, Missouri. (The Santa Fe and Oregon Trail shared the same routes in Jackson County. Others crossings of the Blue River within the confines of the Blue River Channel Project boundaries shall also be noted.)

A vast amount of material is available on the Santa Fe and Oregon Trails, but the Blue River Crossing on the Independence-Westport Road is seldom mentioned. The reasons for compiling historical information on this area are: (1), to make available in one publication, historical data now scattered about in many sources, (2), to determine what evidence remains of the Independence-Westport Road Crossing, and possibly other crossings in this section of the Blue River, and (3), to provide information on the crossing(s) to the State Historic Preservation Office for evaluation in regard to National Register of Historic Places designation.<sup>18</sup>

### **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

A history of the project area is only part of the larger history of Jackson County. Residents of the area have included Indians (Osage in particular), fur traders, Mormons, farmers and town dwellers before 1860. More important for the purposes of this study were the thousands of travelers who passed through the county via the Santa Fe and Oregon Trails. Because the Blue River bisected the county, any traveler who wanted to take a direct overland route between Independence and Westport had to cross the Blue River. For travelers on the Santa Fe and Oregon Trail, this crossing was used primarily during the 1830s through the early 1850s. There were other crossings, but of the alternate crossings, the one probably used the most, especially by individuals and small groups, was the one on the Independence-Westport Road where it crossed the Blue River in the E 1/2-NW 1/4-S13-T49N-R33W. The oldest and main Santa Fe Trail crossing was located farther south near present 110th street, Kansas City, Missouri.

During the Civil War, 1861-1865, a major battle took place along the banks of the Blue River. Maps indicated that several crossings were used then. After the war, newly built railroads replaced the need for the Santa Fe and Oregon Trails in Missouri. The county filled with settlers after the war and the Blue River Valley remained as farmland for many decades.

## **QUESTIONS REGARDING THE INDEPENDENCE-WESTPORT ROAD CROSSING**

While researching the history, the principal investigator compiled information necessary to answer the questions posed in the Research Design presented to the Kansas City District Corps of Engineers. They are as follows:

1. What is the topography surrounding the Blue River?
2. In the 19th century did the topography bordering the Blue River encourage or discourage crossing?
3. What routes were the Indians likely to use?
4. What was the historical progression regarding trail origination points beginning with Fort Osage?
5. What were the preferred Santa Fe and Oregon Trail routes from Independence before the existence of Westport Landing?
6. Did Jackson County of the State of Missouri do anything to improve the crossing(s) between Independence and Westport, such as laying a rock ford, bridging, grading the river banks?
7. In later years, but before 1900, was the road between Independence and Westport used frequently?
8. What bridges existed here and at other places within the Blue River Project boundaries?
10. When was the Independence-Westport Road abandoned? Why?
11. What retarded the development of the Blue River Valley and how did that change in the 1920s and 1930s? How were the Independence-Westport Road and others crossings affected?
12. How did floods on the Blue River affect city planning regarding that river?
13. What has been done to the channel of the Blue River to change it from its original course? When did this take place? And why?
14. After all the changes that have taken place over the years in the Blue River Project area, are there traces of the trail on either of the banks and nearby terrain?

15. Has the course of the Blue River been changed in such a way as to eliminate evidence of various crossings, especially the one near 27th and Topping streets?

16. Could the Independence-Westport Road Crossing near 27th and Topping be considered for National Historic Places designation as a Santa Fe and Oregon Trail alternate? On what grounds?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Data Collection**

The principal investigator consulted a variety of sources to obtain a history of the area. Intensive research was done in the Kansas City (Missouri) Public Library, Missouri Valley Room, using files classified by topic, atlas maps of Jackson County, newspaper clipping files on microfilm, map collections, unpublished theses and dissertations, and books and articles on local history. The Jackson County Court Record Books, available in the Records Storage Center, Kansas City, Missouri, were of the greatest value for they documented the development of the Independence-Westport Road Crossing. *Mormon Redress Petitions, Documents of the 1833-1838 Missouri Conflict*, Vol. 16, published by Brigham Young University, 1993, gave a detailed description of activity on the Independence-Westport Road and Crossing, including accounts by the ferry operators in 1831-1833. Ronald Romig, archivist for the Reorganized Latter Day Saints Church in Independence, Missouri, has collected primary materials about the Mormon experience in Jackson County, most of which has never been published. Pauline Fowler, local historian and expert on the Santa Fe Trail in Jackson County made excellent suggestions on seeking sources. The Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City, has copies of the state's earliest documents.

### **Major Data Collection Sites**

Jackson County Clerk, Records Storage Center, Kansas City, Missouri  
Jackson County Courthouse, Register of Deeds, Independence and Kansas City, Missouri  
Jackson County Historical Society, Independence, Missouri  
Kansas City Public Library, Kansas City, Missouri  
Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas  
Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City, Missouri  
Missouri, State Historical Society of, at Columbia  
Missouri State Preservation Office, Jefferson City  
Oregon-California Trail Association, Independence, Kansas  
Reorganized Latter Day Saints Archives, Independence, Missouri  
Trails Museum, Independence, Missouri  
University of Kansas Libraries: Engineering

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\_\_\_\_\_. Government Documents

\_\_\_\_\_. Kansas Collection

University of Missouri at Kansas City Library, Kansas City, Missouri

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Kansas City District, Kansas City, Missouri

### **Visual Inspection and Photographic Documentation**

Visits to the site of the Independence-Westport Road Crossing took place in February and March while the vegetation was dormant. This was a good time to photograph the crossing, the river banks, and the trail area. The U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, Kansas City District, supplied aerial photographs of the area dating from 1936. Staff employees of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Kansas City District, provided maps, and made photographs of maps and documents pertinent to this project from copies in the Jackson County Courthouse, Independence, and the Missouri Valley Room of Kansas City Public Library.

## CHAPTER 3

# THE INDEPENDENCE-WESTPORT ROAD AND CROSSING

## INTRODUCTION

The story of the Independence-Westport Road is much more than one related to the Santa Fe and Oregon Trails. For hundreds of years before Missouri became a state, Osage, Missouri, Sauk and Fox, and Kansas Indians occupied the territory near the Blue River. The federal government moved the Indian tribes out of Missouri in 1825 and west into Indian Territory. They surveyed the land, then encouraged white settlers to buy or claim land in the county. One of the major proponents of moving the Indians west of Missouri was Isaac McCoy, a Baptist Missionary to the Indians. He bought the land on which the Sauk Indian village stood, one mile south of Brush Creek. He and his son, John McCoy, also claimed other land in western Jackson County.<sup>19</sup>

The towns of Independence, Westport, and the Town of Kansas (Kansas City) became major starting points for traders, travelers and emigrants going west on the Santa Fe and Oregon Trails. These towns also served as destinations for returning United States based Santa Fe traders and for Mexicans who brought goods to Missouri to sell. Some of these people made Jackson County their temporary home through the winter. The Oregon Trail, originating with fur traders going to the Rocky Mountains, became primarily an emigrant route to Oregon and California in the 1840s and 1850s decades.

## THE SANTA FE TRAIL AND TRADE

The route to Santa Fe, Mexico, had been traversed before it became a commercial route used regularly by traders bringing goods from St. Louis and the United States to sell in Mexico. In order to encourage commercial trade with Mexico, Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, called for a survey of the route to Santa Fe. In 1825 U. S. government surveyors began at Fort Osage, the zero milestone, and mapped a route southwest which exited fourteen miles south of the Kansas River-Missouri River junction.

Early in the year 1827, a group of men founded the town of Independence in western Missouri, several miles west of Fort Osage. This fort was closed in 1827 due to the Indians being moved out of Missouri. A new garrison, Cantonment Leavenworth, opened in Indian Territory (Kansas) the same year. When Fort Osage closed, Independence became the eastern terminus for the Santa Fe Trail. Overland traders picked up their merchandise at Blue Mills Landing, a Missouri river port four miles above Independence. They transported it to Independence where they outfitted their wagon trains and made plans for the trip west.

William E. Brown wrote in *The Santa Fe Trail, National Park Service Historic Sites Survey*, 1963, that:

Independence was the entrepot for trade goods bought in St. Louis, New York, Philadelphia, and Europe. The major traders made their own purchases in these centers, then had the goods shipped to Independence in time for departure of the caravans in the spring.

Smaller operators usually purchased their animals, wagons, supplies and trade goods in Independence. The lively trade made Independence prosper, and it was "second only to Santa Fe as a significant trail site." <sup>20</sup>

The steamboat landing at Blue Mills that gave Independence priority over the new settlements of Westport and the Town of Kansas (later Kansas City), was washed away in the flood of 1843. Within a year, Independence built Wayne's Landing on the Missouri River, two miles north of town.

In the meantime, the town of Westport, established in 1833 by John McCoy, had begun drawing the outfitting trade away from Independence. Around 1839, merchants in Westport started having their supplies shipped to a landing four miles north on the south bank of the Missouri. First called Westport Landing, it would become Kansas City. It was much more convenient for some traders and travelers to take the steamboats up the Missouri to Westport Landing, take the trail down to Westport, then head west. Going by river to, or from, Westport Landing eliminated the time needed to take the overland route from Independence west or southwest.

## THE OREGON TRAIL

The Lewis and Clark expedition (1803-1806) stimulated interest in the Northwest. After 1810 many trappers headed for that area with a large number of them hunting beaver in the Rocky Mountains. The trappers blazed a trail which became the great national highway for pioneers moving west into the Oregon Territory. The immediate predecessor of the Oregon Trail was known as the "Sublette Trace," a favored route taken by fur trapper and trader William L. Sublette of Missouri. The Trail originated in Independence, Missouri, in 1842, with the first party of emigrants leaving in the spring that year. In the 1840s, it became a well defined, heavily traveled road for emigrants. Those persons going to Oregon used the Santa Fe Trail routes within Jackson County and separated from the Santa Fe Trail a few miles west of the Missouri border. Emigrants to Oregon began to use other origination points, such as Westport in Jackson County, Leavenworth, and sites in Nebraska and Iowa.

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE INDEPENDENCE-WESTPORT ROAD AND CROSSING

Several local factors contributed to routing a road from Independence west to the border five years before the founding of Westport. A road was needed to the new garrison at Leavenworth; to the missions to the Indians in neighboring Indian Territory, and for the local settlers to use in getting to town. Therefore, the Jackson County officers, on September 3, 1827, ordered the establishment of a public highway west to the border of Missouri.<sup>21</sup> The officers were not too exact about the route of the road, only that it was to pass by Christian's place, cross Rock Creek, go past Aikmen's, cross the lower ford on the Big Blue River, pass near Marsten's and "old man Barnes," then on to Section 16 and west to the border.<sup>22</sup> (Figures 11 & 12)

*Laws of the State of Missouri*, 1825, stipulated that public roads "shall be cleared of all trees and brush at least 20 feet wide, and such limbs of trees as may incommode horsemen or carriages shall be cut away, and no stump shall exceed 12 inches in height." The overseer of the road had the duty of putting up road signs or directions "painted on boards with capital letters, and safely secured on posts or trees and every conspicuous fork of such public roads within his road division . . . ." <sup>23</sup> County records indicated that the road was officially ready for public use by 1830.<sup>24</sup>

When they planned this road west, the County noted that a wagon ford was already in use on the Big Blue River. Although the county road west out of Independence was not designated as an alternate road for the Santa Fe Trail, the route could have been used as such. It was the travelers themselves who wanted to avoid the long route down the original trail to present 110th street if they wanted to stop at the Indian Agency on the border, or later Westport or Shawnee Mission, or follow the Oregon Trail south of the Kansas River. These travelers may have crossed in several places along the length of the Blue River. Apparently the crossing the E 1/2-NW 1/4-S13-T49N-R33W, had topographical advantages compared to other crossings, or it would not have been chosen by the county as a county road.

The river near the Independence-Westport Road Crossing was about 33 feet wide in 1826.<sup>25</sup> On the west bank, the road followed a ravine up a gradual incline. If the river banks were steep, road builders and wagon train travelers would dig out a ramp on the steeper banks to make passage easier.



2. Ordered, That the Oregon Road as laid out be established as a public highway.

State of Missouri, County of Jackson.  
To the Honorable the County Court.

80071

Pursuant to an order of the County Court for the County of Jackson at the August term 1827, appointing Richard B. Chiles, John Young, John Whistman, Robert Johnson and James Welch Commissioners to view and mark out a way for a Road the Nearest and best Way from the County Seat of this County to the Boundary line of this State. So as to intersect a Road leading from the New Garrison the undersigned Commissioners after being sworn according to law. Report to said Court that they have executed the same beginning at the Public square of the County Seat aforesaid thence by the way of Lexington Street to the Western boundary of said town thence with a marked line crossing the Americans at Adam Christensons thence a straight line to the present ford on Rock Creek thence with the old Road with little variation by Alexander Christophers to the lower ford on Big Blue thence with the said Road by Marsters the old Max Amers and with and near the Ridge Road as far as the 16<sup>th</sup> Section, thence a west course as marked out on the divide between Fowler branch and Brush Creek to the Road from Robert Johnsons house to his mill, thence North of west leaving said mill on the North on a marked line to the Boundary line crossing Turkey Creek  $\frac{1}{4}$  of a mile South east of said line where there can be by some digging a tolerable crossing the only material obstruction excepting the east Bank of Big Blue, on the whole route of said Road which we suppose is not exceeding Eleven miles given

Witness our hands this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sept 1827.

Rich<sup>d</sup> B. Chiles

John Whistman

John Young

And that the said Road be established as a public highway.

Figure 11. Order establishing a public road to the western border of Missouri. From the Jackson County Court Record, Book 1, (1827-1833), Page 21

from a money a person by  
the route as viewed to the North end of ~~Clayton~~ <sup>Clayton</sup> street thence South  
and said street to a point opposite the middle of the east end  
of the Public square the survey of Independence

It is ordered by the Court, That Andrew Wilson be appointed  
Overseer of the Road Division No 5. Commencing at Lexington  
Street opposite the South east Corner of the Public Square thence  
with said street to the West line of the Crown tract thence with the  
Road as viewed and marked out to the ford of Rock Creek.

It is ordered by the Court, That Alexander Schuman be app-  
ointed Overseer of Road division No 6. leading from the ford  
of Rock Creek by the Road as viewed and marked out to the  
middle of the Main channel of Big Blue at the Wagon ford.

It is ordered by the Court, That William Barnes be appointed  
Overseer of Road division No 7. leading from the middle of  
the Main channel of Big Blue to where the Road as viewed &  
marked out for it strikes the 16<sup>th</sup> section.

It is ordered by the Court that Robert Johnson be appointed  
Overseer of the Road division No 8 leading from the east line  
of the 16<sup>th</sup> section by the route as viewed and marked out to the  
boundary line of the State.

It is ordered by the Court, That Edwin F. Hicks be appointed  
Overseer of the Road Division No 9. Commencing at a point  
in Main Street in the town of Independence opposite the middle  
of the east end of the Public square thence with said street South  
to the Southern line of the town tract thence with the Road as viewed

Figure 12. County designation of overseers for sections of the road west of Independence. Note the second and third full paragraphs which pertain to the crossing on the Blue River. From Jackson County Court Record, Book 1, Page 23.

## MORMON SETTLEMENT NEAR THE BLUE RIVER CROSSING

Included among the earliest settlers were the Mormons, a newly organized religious sect founded by Joseph Smith in 1830. Edward Partridge, the first bishop of the Church of Christ (Mormon), had a revelation that Independence, Missouri, would be the center for their new church. Bishop Partridge, Joseph Smith, and others visited Jackson County in July 1831, and chose this fertile county to be their promised land, their Zion. Within two years, approximately 1200 Mormons, possibly more, moved to Jackson County buying land near Independence and western Jackson County.

Between 1831 and 1833, Mormon Bishop Edward Partridge, with funds obtained by the church, bought 1,985.07 acres, including the N 1/2-S13-T49N-R33W, on which the Independence-Westport Road and Crossing were located.<sup>26</sup> Partridge acquired the land from the United States, from the State of Missouri and from private individuals.

The Mormons established several small settlements. One of them was on the east bank of the Blue, along the public road from Independence to the Shawnee Indian agency near the western Missouri border. In addition to Section 13, Bishop Partridge also purchased the SW1/4, S18-T49N-R33W, a tract touching the southeast corner of S13-T49N-R33W. The public road from Independence also crossed this tract. Other individuals bought tracts of land close to the Partridge land. Some of the Mormons built on land purchased by Partridge, dividing it into several tracts.<sup>27</sup> (Figure 14)



Figure 13. Edward Partridge

In Figure 14, a portion of the Jackson County Land Entries map shows parts of Townships 49 North, Ranges 32 and 33 West. Note the Partridge purchases on Section 18 of Range 32 West, and Section 18 of Range 33 West. The Independence-Westport Road crossed these two sections with the river crossing being in Section 13 of Township 49 North. It was still known as the road to the Shawnee or Indian Agency. The Big Blue settlement was located on Section 13 and 24 of R33W and Section 18 of R32W.<sup>28</sup>



Figure 14. A portion of the Original Land Entries Maps, Township 49 North, Ranges 32 and 33 West, showing the Edward Partridge tracts in S13-T49N-R33W, and S18-T49N-R32W. The route of the Independence-Westport Road is shown.

## THE FERRY AT BLUE RIVER CROSSING

Influential to the development of this Big Blue community was the establishment of a ferry across the Blue River in Section 13. Oren Rockwell obtained a license from the county to keep a ferry on the Big Blue River "where the main road crosses the same . . ." Rockwell and his son, Oren Porter Rockwell, operated the ferry together and may have begun the service earlier than November 7, 1832, the official date. The service was particularly valuable to the many Mormons who had bought land in western Jackson County.<sup>29</sup>

The rates for the ferry in 1832 were:

Loaded wagon and team	50 cents
Empty wagon and team	37 1/2 cents
Loaded wagon with less than 6 animals	25 cents
Empty wagon with less than 6 animals	25 cents
Two wheeled carriage, Dearborn	37 1/2 cents
Man and horse	6 1/4 cents
Single man	3 cents
Loose animal	3 cents

Source: Jackson County Court Record, Book 1, Nov. 7, 1832, p. 180.

Oren Rockwell, the elder, had been a boyhood friend of Joseph Smith, and had accompanied an advance party of Mormons to Missouri in 1831. The rest of the Rockwells came later, traveling up the Blue River by flatboat to the site of the lower crossing.<sup>30</sup> The river was not always fordable, thus the location of a ferry service on this major road was convenient for travelers and potentially profitable for the Rockwells. The road west to the border was frequently used by Indian agents, missionaries to the Indians, suppliers to the missions, first settlers, and the newly arrived Mormons.

The Rockwell families built two homes near their ferry. There were joined in the neighborhood, within a mile of themselves, by David Jones and wife, David Pettigrew, Solomon Daniel and wife, Noah Johnson, David Bennett, David Dutton, John Dougherty, Solomon Hancock, Horace Rawson, Charles B. Hancock and others. The Rockwells often hosted community and church gatherings. David Pettigrew, who lived just north of the road on Section 13, wrote:

. . . . My farm lies six miles west of Independence upon the river Blue and on the main road leading to Fort Leavenworth and the Indian Agency. It is a road very much traveled and to all appearance there is a great deal of business done in this section of the country.<sup>31</sup>

## MORMONS FORCED OUT OF JACKSON COUNTY

Incompatible differences existed between the first settlers and the Mormon arrivals: the Missourians were from the south or border states, and pro-slave; the Mormons were from New England and northern states, and abolitionist. Fearing that the zealous Mormons would soon dominate the county by their rapidly increasing numbers and win an upcoming election, local leaders organized to prevent a Mormon "takeover." While ferrying a large group of men across the Blue in July 1833, Oren Porter Rockwell heard them say that they were on their way to Independence, the county seat, to enter a

resolution to "drive the Mormons from the County." They returned that evening, using the ferry again. On July 20, the same group, or "Mob" as Rockwell remembered them, took the ferry again on their way to Independence where they burned the Mormon newspaper office.<sup>32</sup> They brought Bishop Partridge and Elder Charles Allen to Independence Square where they stripped them of most of their clothes, and covered them with tar and feathers. Acid mixed with the tar made the experience especially painful.

As Rockwell ferried the persecutors across on their return home in the evening, they told him that the Rockwells could stay in the county, unharmed, if they renounced their religious faith as Mormons. On the ferry that night were landowners west of the Blue, including Moses Wilson and sons, Col. Bowers, Thomas Linville, James Linville, Robert Johnson, Indian Agent Richard Cummins, and Baptist Missionary Isaac McCoy. Other opponents to the Mormons from the Independence area were attorneys Russell Hicks and Hugh Brazeale, County Clerk Samuel C. Owens, Jones H. Flournoy, Dr. Noland, Judge Fristo and others.<sup>33</sup>

The Rockwells and their neighbors refused to renounce their church. Oren Porter Rockwell remembered the day in November 1833, when the "Mob" dressed and painted to resemble Indians, called on the Big Blue community. They "abused and insulted the women," tore the roof off of one of the Rockwell houses, and, within the day, destroyed the houses and property of those Mormons living within a mile of the Blue River road crossing. Women and children fled to the fields while the "Mob" brutally beat one of the Mormon men.<sup>34</sup>

The Mormons were still trying to hold on to their land and personal property, when the local militia demanded they surrender all weapons to the militia, and then leave the county. Several hundred Missourians organized into smaller companies of 15 or 20 men (one group was led by Isaac McCoy) who traveled throughout the county persuading the Mormons to leave, or die. They left quickly, taking only what they could carry.<sup>35</sup>

After the Rockwells left, John O. Walker obtained a license to keep a ferry across the Big Blue on the road from Independence to the Shawnee Agency.<sup>36</sup> In the next several years, other persons would operate a ferry at this site. Throughout the county record books from 1827 to 1851, the county officials make frequent references to the main road west, often in regard to changes in overseers.

## **TRAVELING BETWEEN INDEPENDENCE AND WESTPORT**

In 1834, Captain Nathaniel J. Wyeth, of Massachusetts escorted a second expedition to Oregon. They left in the company of the annual fur trading expedition led by William Sublette, experienced fur trader. A member of the Wyeth party, John K. Townsend, physician and naturalist from Philadelphia, kept a journal of the expedition



to Oregon. It has been reprinted in *Early Western Travels*, Volume 3, edited by Reuben Gold Thwaites. On April 28, 1834, at 10 A.M., the caravan of 70 men and 250 horses began their march west. Their "road lay over a vast rolling prairie, with small spots of timber" in the distance. In the afternoon they "crossed the Blue river at a shallow ford," according to Townsend's journal. Whether this was the crossing on the Independence road west is not certain, but it is one of the more specific references. Many other travelers' comments in years to come would refer to traveling ten or twelve miles between Independence and Westport, an indication that they did not take the longer Santa Fe Trail route, fourteen miles south of Westport.

A group of nine missionaries crossed the Blue River in the vicinity of the Independence-Westport Road Crossing in April 1838. One of them, Asa Smith wrote: "The place where we now are is 12 miles from Independence. We came here on Friday afternoon & it was a hard afternoon's work, . . . We had 10 mules to carry our baggage & about a dozen cows & young cattle. . . . We had one river to cross. Ferried some over & some forded." Another person, Mrs. Cushing Eells, noted that "The roads are so bad that he (the wagon driver) breaks the wagon and we are obliged to leave it two or three miles this side of Westport." The women in this party of nine missionaries were the first four white women to travel over the Rocky Mountains to Oregon Territory. The letters and diaries of these women are reprinted in *First White Women Over the Rockies, 1836-1838*, (pages 138-139, and 295, Vol. 3) It seems quite possible that this party of nine missionaries did use part of the Independence-Westport Road and Crossing although no one identified the road by name. The small party of missionaries joined a caravan of the American Fur Company west of Westport. By the 1840s, it was not uncommon for small groups to assemble into a much larger group just over the Missouri border. There, they would organize, and select a captain, if no one was in charge of the expedition already.

## **BRIDGING THE BLUE ON THE INDEPENDENCE-WESTPORT ROAD**

Using funds from a state internal improvements program, the county let a bridge contract to the lowest bidder to build a bridge "across the Big Blue River on the lower road leading from Independence to the Shawnee Agency at or near Rockwells' former Ferry at such place as Moses G. Wilson may select. . ." (Wilson owned land adjacent to the former Partridge tract on the Blue River. His land was in the SE 1/4-S12-T49N-R33W.) Of this bridge, and another on the Little Blue River east of Independence, the county officers commented on September 15, 1834, in Book 2, Jackson County Court Records:

That all of said bridges when completed will not be only of general utility to the citizens of said county but to emigrants, mail facilities and travelers in general to this section of the county.

Levi Shepherd had the lowest and best bid of \$700, and agreed to build according to plans exhibited in the County Clerk's office. Shepherd had one-third of the bridge finished by February 1835, but did not complete the project until 1836. A description of the boundary for road District #37 indicated the bridge was completed by May 1836: ". . .commencing at the ford on Big Blue Creek at the bridge and running West with the main road to Westport. . . ." Court minutes for January 7, 1837, report that the court had "caused a frame bridge to be built over Big Blue Creek in the Lower Road leading from the Town of Independence to the Shawnee Agency. . . ." for the cost of \$700.<sup>37</sup>

Jackson County planned more improvements for the Big Blue River crossing in May 1837. The county ordered the "making of the hill on the west side of Big Blue Creek at the Bridge on said Creek commencing at the West end of said Bridge to where the same intersects the old road so as to make the same a good road." The hill was to be repaired "so as to make it a given way fr carriage and waggons and to be made as Strait as possible fr the convenience of travellers." (The spelling is as it appears in Jackson County Court Records, Book 2, May 1, 1837, p. 277. The location of the "old road" was not given.) Peter Booth won the contract with a low bid of \$122 for road repairs. Furthermore, the road west of the bridge was to be opened to forty feet in width all the way to the western Missouri border. Throughout the years, from the road's official first year, overseers appointed for various sections of the road were responsible for maintenance of the road. No other road in the county west of Independence had to comply with the forty-foot width requirement.

Even though a bridge existed at the crossing, a ferry service continued. On May 7, 1838, for example, the Jackson County Court Record, Book 2, p.375 recorded the issuing of a license "to keep a ferry on Big Blue at the Bridge. . . ."

In April 1841, the county announced the planning of a State Road from Independence to Westport. This one would be only a mile north of the bridge crossing. The proposed road went almost straight west from Independence to the Big Blue River where it would cross at Wilson's ford in the SE 1/4-S12-T49N-R33W. Moses Wilson, the first recorded owner of the site, had purchased tract in November 1829. After crossing the Blue River, the proposed road curved toward Westport. The newer road was more direct than the older, somewhat circuitous Independence-Westport Road. Construction of the road and a proposed bridge suffered delays due to landowner protest and lack of funds. Even though there was no bridge at the Wilson ford and no ferry license issued for this site, it is possible that the route was used by Santa Fe traders and Oregon bound emigrants. Emigrants did not always use the major routes or the ones most travellers followed, but rather went where there was grass for livestock or to avoid muddy terrain. The heaviest travel for the Oregon Trail was in the 1840s, and for the California Trail (which used the Oregon Trail as far as central Nevada), 1849-1850, the gold rush years. With both a ferry service and a bridge on the maintained public road through S13-T49N-R33W, travelers had to find the Independent-Westport Road and Crossing a convenient overland route to take to Westport and the Oregon Trail during the 1830s and 1840s.



During this pre-Civil War period, Jackson County remained preoccupied with the settlement of the county by farmers and the development of its towns, especially Kansas City. The Santa Fe and Oregon Trails carried a good deal of traffic until the 1850s, when the border towns of Westport and Kansas City came to dominate as origination points from Missouri.

## THE CIVIL WAR NEAR THE BLUE RIVER

Guerilla warfare marked the early stages of the Civil War in Jackson County, Missouri. Conflict between free-staters of neighboring Kansas and pro-slavers of Missouri was particularly vicious, with marauding bands stealing livestock, destroying property and murdering civilians.

The only major battle fought in western Jackson County occurred in late October 1864. Confederate General Sterling Price and approximately 28,000 troops pushed back the Union forces from the Little Blue River, through Independence and to the west bank of the Blue River. There the Union Army under the command of General Samuel E. Curtis took a stand to defend Kansas City and Westport. The Union forces, about 15,000 men strong, took positions in the bluffs high above the Blue from the "river's mouth southward for about fifteen miles to Russell's ford near Hickman Mills." General Curtis made his headquarters ". . . at the main ford where the Independence-Kansas City road crossed. . . the river."<sup>38</sup> It appears that what they call the "main ford" was near present Independence Avenue. The river here was rather "large, deep, and of steep banks," and bridged.<sup>39</sup> By midnight of October 21, General Curtis had prepared for battle. His main line extended for six miles to the mouth of the Blue where a small steamboat was anchored. "North of the Kansas City-Independence road as it crossed the main ford was the 6th Kansas State Militia under Colonel James Montgomery, together with six hundred colored volunteers, well-mounted and trained." The maps drawn at the time indicated that roads from Independence to Westport and Kansas City crossed at fords near 15th Street all the way down to Byram's ford, near present 63rd Street.<sup>40</sup> (Figure 7 and 8)

General Curtis expected General Price to come straight west from Independence and attempt to cross the river around present 15th Street. General Price chose instead to stay east of the Big Blue River, then make a surprise crossing at a cattle ford just north of Brush Creek (around present 45th Street). A major battle, called the "Gettysburg of the West", took place near Byram's ford (63rd Street) and Westport, with a thousand casualties per side. The Union drove the Confederates south into Kansas where they suffered a major defeat. (See Figure 7 & 8 for a map of the battlefield.) Although the Union Army was prepared to battle in an area which would have included the Independence-Westport Road Crossing, written records indicate this probably did not take place.

## URBANIZATION AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

At the end of the Civil War in 1865, the county population increased and Kansas City became a major regional commercial center. The area around the Blue River crossing and south of there remained rural, much of it undeveloped for many years. An article in the *Kansas City Journal*, June 15, 1922, explained:

Up to the present time this Blue valley district has not been opened up because there is no adequate means of ingress and egress. . . . Only a few old wooden bridges, similar to the one at Westport road, have spanned the Blue river. . . .

During a period of recreational enthusiasm, around 1908, the Kansas City Yacht Club opened on the Blue River. "Members of the Paddle and Camp Club enjoyed excursions on the Big Blue, parades, and regattas." <sup>41</sup> (Figure 15)



Figure 15. The Blue River near 15th street around 1910.

## BEAUTIFUL BLUE TO CITY SEWER

Early in the 20th century, city planners such as George Kessler envisioned the valley of the Blue River as being one huge parkway. A 1913 city map shows the area, which appears to include the river as being as wide as a small lake, between the Independence-

Westport Road Crossing and about 18th Street.(See Figure 9) The *Kansas City Star* wrote about proposed improvement and problems in a May 2, 1915, article:

With all its possibilities for beautification as a pleasure stream, Kansas City never could hope for their realization, while the river was used as an open sewer. All the plans of the park board, all the hopes of citizens, who have dreamed of seeing this wild and beautiful little stream parked and locked and bridged and planted from the Missouri to Swope Park, have waited on this first step--the purification of the river from its present use as a city drain.

The need to improve sewage disposal preceded further park development. Sewer lines were laid along the west bank of the Blue in the mid-1920s. In the meantime, the city council voted down well planned beautification projects, saying that the cost of the sewers were enough for taxpayers. (Figure 16)

Kansas City, still interested in acquiring more park land, purchased a 238.5 acre site called "Blue Valley Park and Santa Fe Trail" in 1943. It was bounded on the north by 23rd Street, on the west by Topping, and on the east by the Blue River. The park is narrowest at the south end due to the Blue River course. The south boundary is roughly half a block south of the Independence-Westport Road Crossing. The road in the park is still depicted in recent city maps. (See Figure 28 for aerial view of the park.)

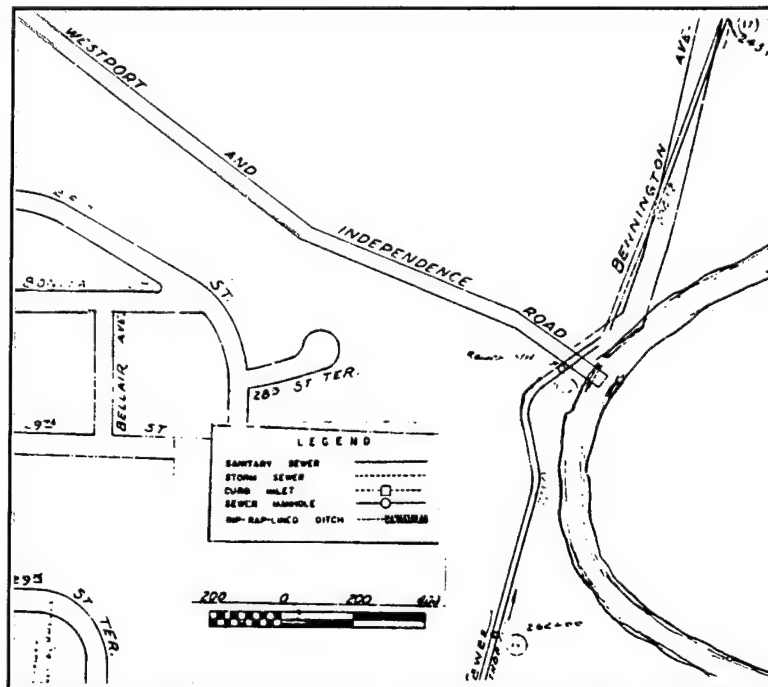


Figure 16. Map of Sewer near Independence-Westport Road Crossing

## FLOOD CONTROL

In the late 1920s, interest in the beauty of a parkway gave way to concern for flood protection. During the 1920s, heavy industry and associated workers had moved into the Blue River Valley and bottom lands, areas vulnerable to flooding. The flood of 1928,

which crested at 49 feet on the Blue River, was the highest level recorded to that date, generated much discussion about flood protection, but no action came on flood control until the 1930s. In 1933, some 1700 laborers were widening and straightening the river channel near 27th Street and the Blue River. Most, if not all of their work was done on the east bank.<sup>42</sup>

Through the years other efforts have been made to reduce the flooding. In 1974 the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers prepared an environmental statement on several Blue River projects. The Flood Control Act of 1970 (PL 91-611) authorized projects which provided for the construction of four lakes and channel modification of a part of the Blue River. Three small lakes (about 3100 acres in all) would have been in Johnson County, Kansas, in the upper basin of the Blue River and a fourth lake on the Missouri side near the Kansas-Missouri border.<sup>43</sup> Local opposition defeated the dam construction proposals. The report assessed the projects' possible impact on the Blue River basin:

The lake projects, operating without channel modification, are designed to prevent all damage in the lower portion of the basin of the basin from floods which have a statistical probability of occurrence of once in 8 years. The proposed channel modification in combination with the four lake projects would control, in the lower reaches of the Blue River, floods having a statistical probability of occurrence of once in 87 years. This degree of protection applies to only a very few low lying commercial developments in the flood plain that encroach upon the banks of the river. Most of the development in the flood plain is afforded a considerably higher degree of protection.

Source: U.S. Army Engineer District, Kansas City, Missouri.  
*Final Environmental Statement, Blue River Projects*  
September 1974. p. I-1

## SUMMARY

The Blue River Valley within the boundaries of the proposed channel modification plan remains predominated by commercial and industrial establishments, with such major industrial firms as Sheffield and Armco locating there, despite occasional flooding. Many homeowners gave up and moved out. However, the area immediately around the old Independence-Westport Road Crossing retains its rural character. The road, west bank only, and crossing site are clearly visible within the boundaries of the park and surrounded by trees and other vegetation. Changes taking place since the historic period of 1827 to 1856, include the disappearance of a bridge, placement of rock and gravel on part of the Independence-Westport Road, burying of a sewer pipe on the west bank, and some modification of the river banks due to natural and man made reasons. The road on the east side has been completely eradicated.

## CHAPTER 4

### PHOTOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION

The Blue River, a winding stream, is bordered on the east by wide flood plains and on the west by steep, wooded uplands. The river is formed by the confluence of Wolf and Coffee Creeks about 3 1/2 miles south of Stanley, Kansas. It winds in a north, northeast course until its meeting with the Missouri River about 6 miles below the Kansas-Missouri river junction. Before any modification, the Blue River had some 49 miles of channel, more than twice the distance of a straight line from the headwaters to the Missouri River. A historian writing in 1881, described the river channel as being deep and the current rapid. "On both sides for nearly its whole course there is timber of good quality, and outcropping from the bluffs building stone is found in endless quantities." <sup>44</sup>

Among the most interesting descriptions were those made by the surveyors in 1826 who noted that the Blue River channel was some fifty links wide (about 33 feet) in Section 12, which is adjacent to Section 13 on which the Independence-Westport Road Crossing was located. Underneath the shade of tall elm, ash, hackberry and oak trees, was an undergrowth of brush, vines and briars. The surveyor measured walnut and sycamore trees 40" in diameter, white oak 18" and black oak, 24". <sup>45</sup>

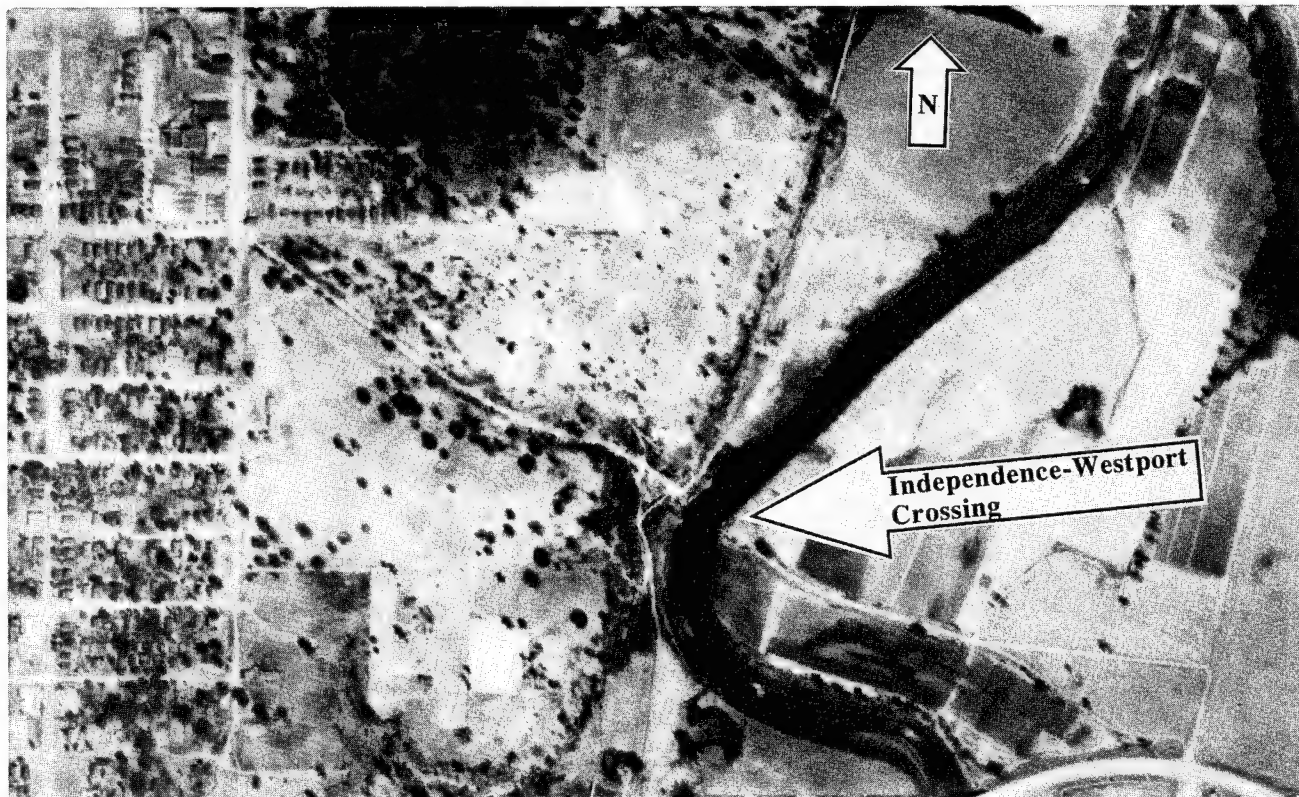
There was a major modification on the Blue River channel between 9th Street and the mouth of Brush Creek. According to an article in the *Kansas City Times*, March 10, 1937, the Blue River channel between 23rd and 27th streets had been straightened, "eliminating a 2-mile horseshoe bend." Plans called for the channel to be widened to 110 feet from 23rd Street to Brush Creek. These Blue River flood protection project were funded largely by the federal government under the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The WPA paid for labor and truck costs, while the city furnished supplies.

Kansas City also cleared the river banks of vegetation, believing that such action would expedite the flow of water on its way to the Missouri. An aerial view of the Independence-Westport Road Crossing shows the effect of this clearing. In time, however, the trees returned once again to forest the river banks.

The Independence-Westport Road near 27th and Topping streets remains clearly visible in 1993. The crossing site, however, has been altered. Once, a bridge probably resting on stone abutments, spanned the river at the old crossing site. The dressed-stone bridge abutments, from a later period, remain on both the east and west river banks. The east bank has been filled with earth so that the abutment stands several yards back from the river. On the west side, a stone abutment stands about 10 feet from the river. There are no visible remains of the crossing (except for the river) on the east bank due

to the fill done years ago. However, on the west side, the narrow road, about 15 feet wide, beginning west of the abutment, follows a ravine uphill. The road, now an eroding, rocky path ends at the clearing near 27th and Topping. Along either side of the road is a dense thicket of trees and brush, with a small clearing at the west end of the road. An August 1936 aerial photo shows sparse vegetation and a clear view of the road; aerial photos taken in later years, continue to show the road even though vegetation has increased around it.

The aerial photographs and on-the-ground photographs document the recent history of the Independence-Westport Road and Crossing.



**Figure 17. Blue River Project Area, August 21, 1936, showing the Independence-Westport Road crossing the Blue River**



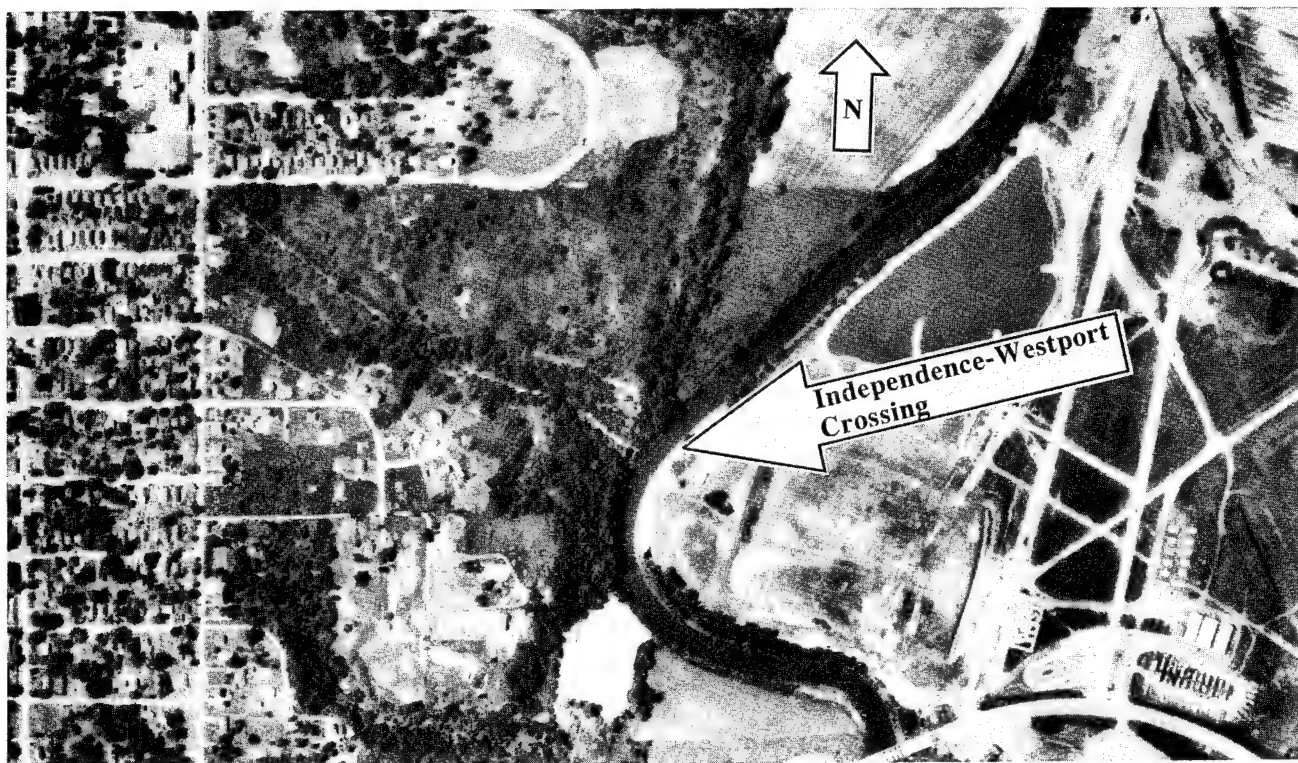


Figure 18. Blue River Project Area, June 10, 1957

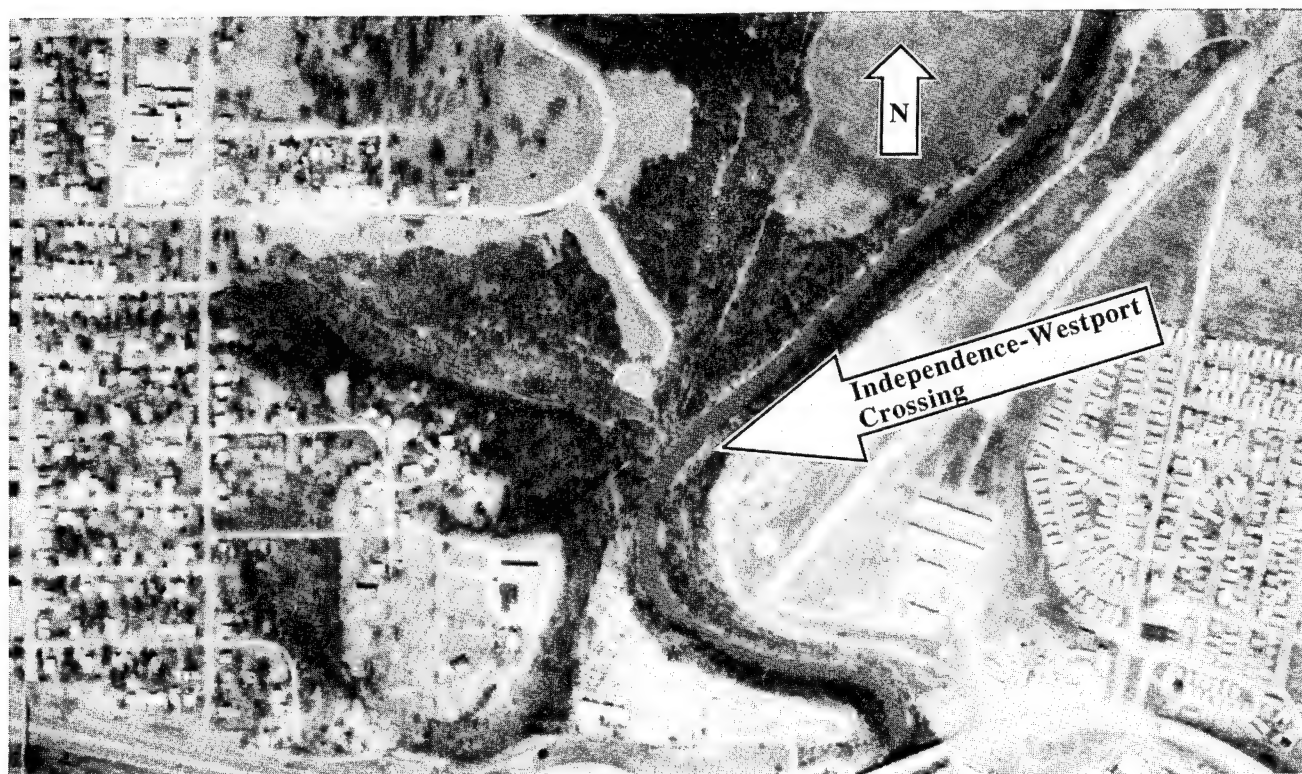


Figure 19. Blue River Project Area, April 24, 1974

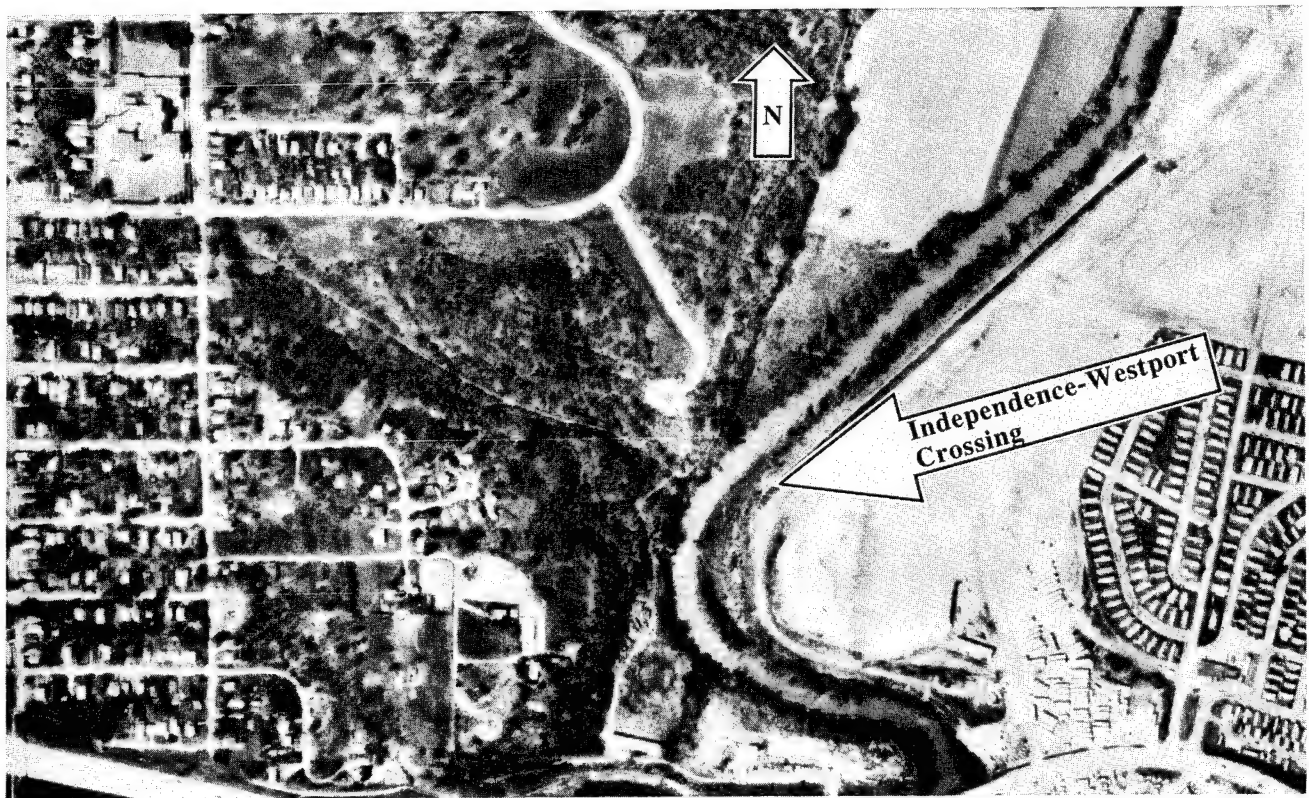


Figure 20. Blue River Project Area, March 22, 1982



Figure 21. Stone Marker at 27th and Topping

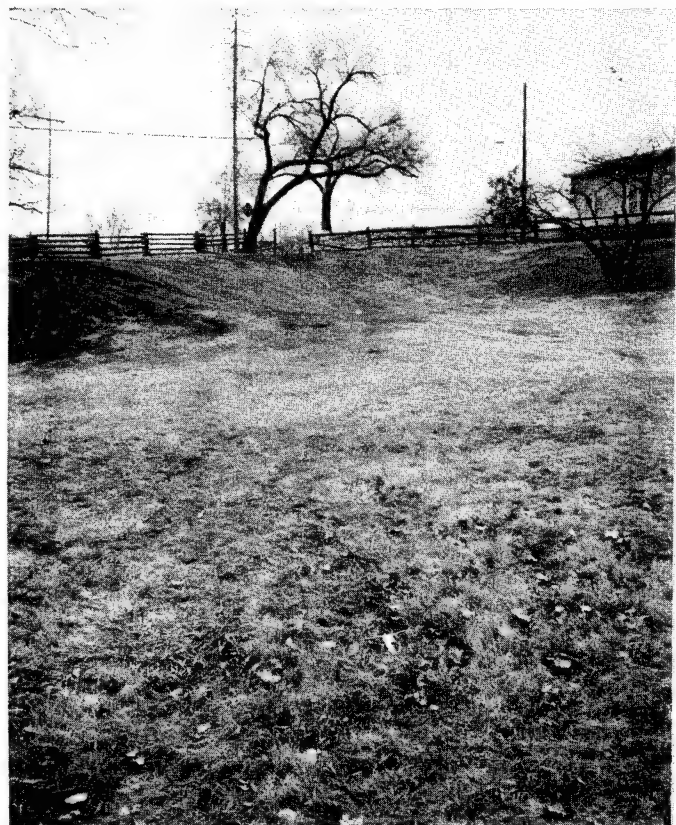
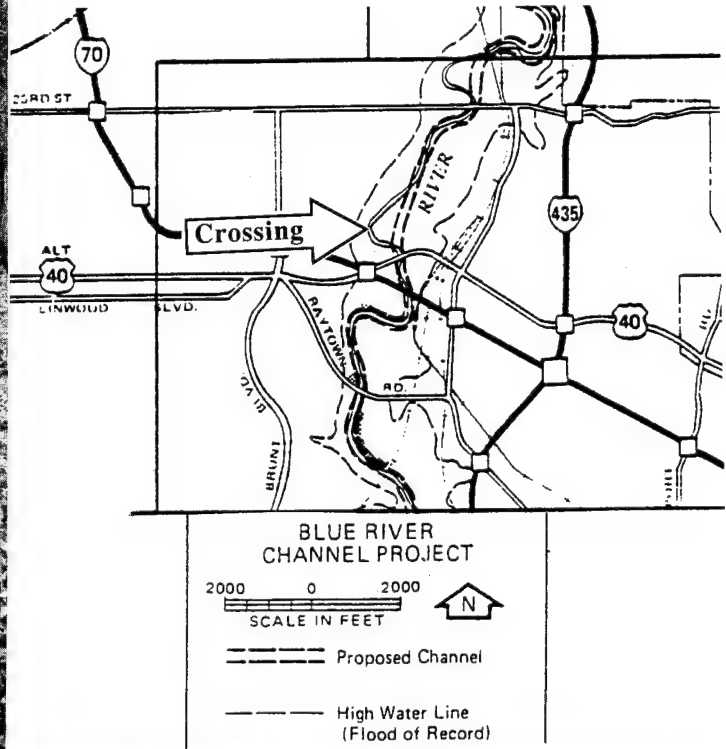


Figure 22. Looking Northwest to 27th and Topping





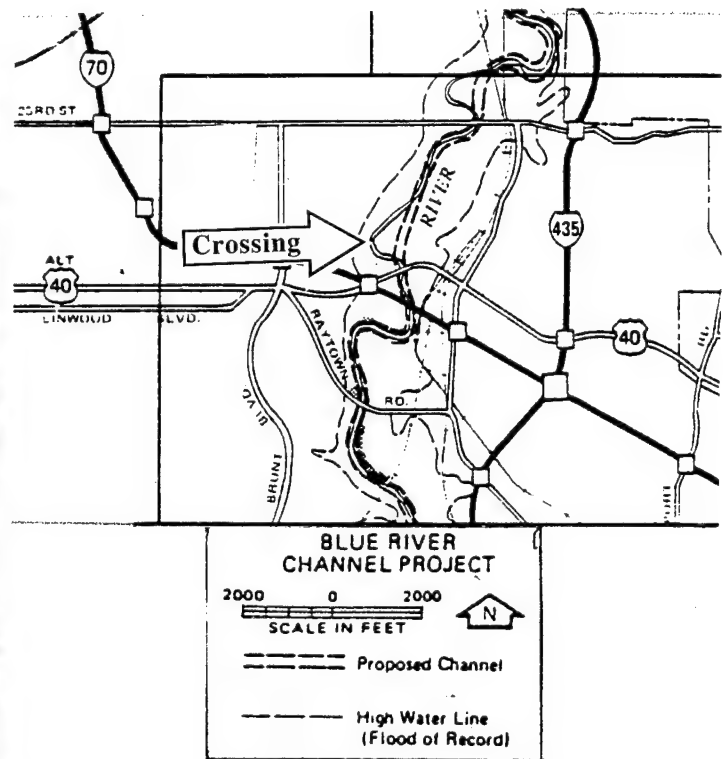
**Figure 23. Going southeast toward the Blue River on the Independence-Westport Road**



**Figure 24. Remains of a stone bridge abutment on the west bank of the Blue River**



**Figure 25. The Blue River and the stone bridge abutment on the east bank**



**Figure 26. The sewer line on the west bank of the Blue River near the Independence-Westport Road Crossing**



**Figure 27. Stone abutment on the west bank of the Blue River on the Independence-Westport Road Crossing**

## **CHAPTER 5**

# **NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES EVALUATION**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The proposed construction of the Blue River Flood Protection Project will encompass the area designated as the Independence-Westport Crossing on the Blue River. The crossing is located in Blue Valley Park, near 27th and Topping streets, Kansas City, Missouri. It has been identified as an alternate route of the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails by the National Park Service.

The objective of this documentary review and on-the-ground surface investigation is to make a National Register of Historic Places evaluation of the site(s) based on the documentary review and on physical condition.

For the purposes of this chapter, the emphasis will be on the National Register of Historic Places evaluation of the Independence-Westport Crossing of the Blue River near 27th and Topping, Kansas City, Missouri. The crossing connected the Independence-Westport Road which was sometimes used as an alternate Santa Fe Trail/Oregon route in the late 1820s, the 1830s, the 1840s, and the early 1850s. Two other crossings existed within the Blue River Project Area. One was at 23rd Street and another at 15th Street, now Truman Road. No primary material was located which would indicate that either of these crossings were frequently used alternates on the Santa Fe/Oregon Trail. These crossings do not appear to be potentially eligible for consideration on the National Register of Historic Places. The 15th Street area is heavily industrialized, and the area east of the 23rd Street site is also developed commercially and industrially.

The Independence-Westport Crossing is located within the proposed Blue River Flood Protection Project. The proposed plan calls for rerouting the river by filling the existing river channel with earth, and creating a new channel about 275 feet to the east. A consequence of this action would be the elimination of the Independence-Westport Crossing at its original site and the severing of its historic connection with the Independence-Westport Road. The road itself is outside the proposed project and will not be affected. The bridge abutments will remain to mark the original river channel.

## **PROPERTY NAME**

County records show that the crossing was used as a wagon ford in 1827 when the Jackson County officials proposed a road from Independence west to link up with the road coming down from Fort Leavenworth. At that time it was informally called the road to the Shawnee Agency. Sometimes the local residents referred to it as the lower

crossing of the Big Blue (the name used then). The upper crossing was further upstream on the main Santa Fe Trail around present 110th Street. When the settlement of Westport was founded on the road in 1833, the road became known as the Independence-Westport Road. As the city of Kansas City expanded over the years, more of the road disappeared. However, one-third mile segment of that historic road remains in Blue Valley Park near 27th and Topping.

## **PROPERTY LOCATION**

The legal address of the Independence-Westport Crossing is: East 1/2, Northwest 1/4, Section 13, Township 49 North, Range 33 West. The now abandoned Independence-Westport Road intersects the currently used streets at 27th and Topping. The old road angles southeast for about one third mile before reaching the bridge abutment which stands at the west edge of the river. The bridge is gone. The site is located at the south end of Blue Valley Park, Kansas City, Missouri.

## **CLASSIFICATION**

According to the definition appearing in the Department of the Interior Regulations, 36 CFR PART 60: National Register of Historic Places, the Independence-Westport Road Crossing could be classified as a site. They defined site as follows:

A site is the location of a significant event, prehistoric or historic occupation or activity, or a building or structure, whether standing, ruined, or vanished, where the location itself possesses historic, cultural, or archeological value regardless of the value of any existing structure.

A trail is listed among the examples of a site. Such a site "need not be marked by physical remains if it is the location of a . . . historic event or pattern of events. . ."<sup>46</sup> This site, however, does have the remains of the road, and bridge abutments to show that it once was a crossing. The bridge abutments, one on the west bank and the other on the east bank, appear to be of a later date than the original bridge which was constructed in 1836 according to Jackson County records. Nothing remains to show that it was ferry site, but contemporary documentation verifies use of the crossing by fording, by ferry and by bridge.

## **OWNERSHIP**

The first humans on the land were the Indians who resided, hunted and fished in the area. After Jackson County was surveyed in 1826 and land offered for sale, Edward Partridge, in 1831, purchased the N 1/2-NW-1/4-S13-T49N-R33W, the tract which



contained the Blue River Crossing and a segment of the county road west to the Shawnee Agency. After Edward Partridge, the first individual to hold title to the tract, various persons held title; none was historically significant. The tract became part of the Kansas City park system in 1943.

## REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

The *Final Environmental Statement, Blue River Projects*, prepared by U. S. Army Engineer District, Kansas City, Missouri, September 1974, (page II-108), commented briefly on the Santa Fe Trail and the Independence-Westport Road and Crossing. They seem to have relied on mostly, if not entirely, secondary sources.

The Independence-Westport Crossing was identified in the 1981 National Park Service (NPS) report *Comprehensive Management and Use Plan, Oregon National Historic Trail* as being an alternate route of the Oregon Trail and the first major river crossing on this branch of the trail. The report stated: "Local experts claim that this short stretch of trail is the unaltered line of the Oregon Trail. This river crossing site and trail is the least impacted portion of the Oregon Trail to be found in the Kansas City metropolitan area." In their plan the NPS recommended that the "The Parks and Recreation Department of the City of Kansas City, Missouri, should interpret, mark and make accessible to the public the Blue River Crossing site and the short stretch of Oregon Trail within the park."<sup>47</sup> However, in October 1991, when the NPS designated portions of the trail in Kansas City, this area was not included. Although the 1981 NPS report gave the correct legal description of the crossing, its chronology regarding the road development is not congruent with the Jackson County records and contemporary material. The planning and use of the Independence-Westport Road and Crossing preceded the development of Westport. The *Draft Comprehensive Management and Use Plan and Environmental Assessment, Santa Fe National Historic Trail*, U. S. Department of the Interior, NPS, November 1988, lists the Big Blue River Crossing as a site on the historic route (p. 169). A later publication, *Comprehensive Management and Use Plan, Santa Fe National Historic Trail*, May 1990, also lists the Big Blue River Crossing, #37 on a map of the route. To be included in this study, a site had to be potentially historically significant in terms of commerce or other associated activities occurring along the Santa Fe Trail. Furthermore:

Each site or segment must have the potential, as determined through the official certification process. . .to interpret the trail's historical significance and to provide high-quality recreational activities. Each should also have greater than average scenic values, and each should also give visitors the chance to vicariously share the experience of long-ago trail users.<sup>48</sup>

## DESCRIPTION AND INTEGRITY

### SITE DESCRIPTION

The historic site description discusses the present condition of the site and its environment. Integrity of the site refers to the degree to which the setting is a visual reminder of the events and activities that took place there.

First, the description of present conditions. The Independence-Westport Road leading down to the Blue River Crossing site on the west side is clearly visible and is used as a path down through the woods to the river. Bridge abutments remain on both the east and west river banks. These appear to have been constructed at a date later than 1836. Bridge abutments built in 1836 are not visible. The east bank of the crossing has been filled in with dirt so that the abutment stands several yards back from the river. On the west side the dressed stone abutment stands a few feet from the Blue River. There are no visible signs of a ferry crossing used over 150 years ago. The west bank has no ramp up from the river. Floods and man made changes over the years probably erased existing ramps. However, once the river was crossed, a traveler used the road, now about 15 feet wide. It follows a ravine up a gradual incline. The road, an eroded, rocky path ends at the clearing near 27th and Topping. Along both sides of the road are dense thickets of mostly small trees and brush. An August 1936 aerial photo shows sparse vegetation and a clear view of the road. Photos taken in later years show a dense stand of trees obliterating a clear view of the road. The road bed, from the crossing to the present clearing near the 27th and Topping intersection, consists of small and large rocks. There are several massive boulders near the west bank of the river, and large stone underlay parts of the road, made visible by years of erosion.

### SITE INTEGRITY

Next comes a review of integrity of the site. According to the *National Register Bulletin*, the seven aspects of integrity are: location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. Not all aspects need to apply to a site for it to be considered eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>49</sup> The aspects most applicable to the Independence-Westport Crossing of the Blue River would be location, setting, feeling and association.

#### Site Location

Location is simply where the historic event occurred. According to the *Bulletin*, "The actual location of a historic property, complemented by its setting, is particularly important in recapturing the sense of historic events and persons. Except in rare cases, the relationship between a property and its historic associations is destroyed if the

property is moved."<sup>50</sup> At the present time, the Independence-Westport Road Crossing on the Blue River has not been moved, and has undergone some change. The river is wider than it was in 1827. Plans called for widening and deepening the channel around 1937. The channel was widened in some places from about 33 feet to about 110 feet. Views of the present terrain shows that the road up the ravine was the most feasible; bluffs on the north and south sides of the ravine were not conducive to vehicle traffic.

### Site Setting

"Setting is the physical environment of a historic property" and "refers to the character of the place in which the property played its historical role. It involves how, not just where, the property is situated and its relationship to surrounding features and open space."<sup>51</sup> The Independence-Westport Crossing fulfills the criteria of setting due to its being on the original site; to the Independence-Westport Road leading west from the bank of the river at the crossing site and to the remains of the bridge abutments on both the west bank and the east bank indicating that there was a bridge over the river at this point in the road. It may be possible that the exact site of the crossing is not visible, that the fording places would vary from time to time, and that the original bridge was in a slightly different location. However, the maps and the county documents do not list any roadway changes for the period under study, nor do maps drawn later show a route change.

### Site Feeling

"Feeling is a property's expression of the aesthetic or historic sense of a particular period of time. . . . It results from the presence of physical features that, taken together, convey the property's historic character."<sup>52</sup> Although the virgin forest is gone, and the river channel is wider, the site remains surrounded by trees, brush and other vegetation. Being a part of the Kansas City Park system has prevented development of the area immediately around the site. Placement of a main sewer line on the west bank, several feet west of the edge of the river and mostly underground, the bridge abutments, and the presence of trash hanging in the trees and bushes or dumped near the site, are evidence of man's intrusion. The nearest residential and industrial development is about one-fourth mile away. One can hear the roar of traffic on nearby Highway 40, but while standing on the Blue River Crossing site, one can see mostly woods, river and sky.

The "feeling" aspect on the integrity of the Independence-Westport Road and Crossing site was expressed years ago by Miss Anna Ford's 6th grade class at Askew Elementary, 27th and Topping, just across the road from the crossing site:

This short strip of the trail is just as it was over 100 years ago, rough,

dirty and old. . . . Some of us were pretending that we were walking in front of wagons. We could imagine how the trail looked many years ago with its oxen and mule carts, wagon trains, and men and women on horseback . . . . Many of us live near the trail and we often walk it during the summer, hunting arrow-heads, shells used in the Civil War, or just any old thing long ago.

### Site Association

According to the *National Historic Bulletin*, p. 45 "association is the direct link between an important historic event or person and a historic property. A property retains association if it is the place where the event or activity occurred and is sufficiently intact to convey that relationship to an observer." The important historic event or pattern of events in this case was the use of the Independence-Westport Road Crossing of the Blue River by travelers and traders on the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails. The road was more important for local uses, such as Indian relocation, service to the missions, inter-city trade and travel, and rural and urban development.

All properties change over time. The National Register of Historic Places criteria does not require that a "property retain all its historic physical features or characteristics." It must retain the "essential physical features that enable it to convey its historic identity." Essential physical features of the road/trail have not changed significantly, but the crossing site has changed; the river channel is wider and possibly deeper than it was in the historic period.

### SIGNIFICANCE AND HISTORIC CONTEXT

According the National Register of Historic Places Criteria, the quality of significance in American history is present in Criteria A for the Independence-Westport Road Crossing. That criteria pertains to that period of history which is "associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history." In the case of the Independence-Westport Road and Crossing, the area of significance would be transportation, specifically the routes used by travellers, both local and those bound for Santa Fe or Oregon. It was a route used by Indian agents, missionaries, fur traders, merchants, and others during the historical period between 1827 and 1856.

To qualify for the National Register of Historic Places a property must represent a significant part of the history of that area. "Historic contexts are those patterns, themes, or trends in history by which a specific occurrence, property, or site is understood and its meaning . . . within history is made clear." To determine whether a property is significant within its historic context, the property must meet the following five qualifications:



- a. Be a part of the history of the local, area, State or nation that the property represents.
- b. Determine whether that facet of history is significant.
- c. Determine whether the property has relevance and importance in illustrating the historic context.
- d. Determine how the property illustrates that history.
- e. Determine if the property possesses the physical features necessary to convey the aspect of history with which it is associated.<sup>53</sup>

The Santa Fe Trail, of which the Independence-Westport Road and Crossing were a segment, was the principal commercial gateway to Mexico and the American southwest from 1822 to the opening of the Civil War. There was a profitable wagon trade which furnished western trappers, hunters, and settlers with the goods of the East and mid-West. Merchants from Mexico also brought goods over the trail to Westport and Westport Landing. The first traders using wagons left from Ft. Osage, Missouri, in 1823. Soon after the town of Independence was established (1827), it became the trail head, and remained so until the late 1840s, when traders preferred to begin their trip west from Westport, about ten miles west of Independence. The first and major route out of Independence went southwest, leaving Missouri about eight and one-half miles south of Westport. Beginning in 1827, maybe earlier, the road west from Independence to the Indian agency, could also serve as an alternate route for Santa Fe travel.

The historic Oregon Trail originated in Independence, Missouri, for travelers who went overland to the Oregon Territory. (Travelers destined for either Oregon or Santa Fe used the same routes in Jackson County, Missouri.) In the early 19th century, the Oregon route had been explored and used by fur traders who hunted in the Rocky Mountains. Two of those traders, brothers Andrew and William L. Sublette, developed a route which they preferred and one which became known as the "Sublette Trace." They led several parties down the Santa Fe Trail out of Independence, then turned north a few miles west of the Missouri border. After 1842 it became the major emigrant route to Oregon and California. For the Oregon Trail travelers, the Independence-Westport Road and Crossing provided a shorter route west by some seventeen miles over the original Santa Fe Trail. Availability and use of a bridge and a maintained route provided an attractive alternative to the original Santa Fe Trail.

Travel on the Independence-Westport Road and Crossing was active during the 1830s and 1840s; this road was, after all, the only major county road west out of Independence then. It was the only road in western Jackson County for which the county regularly appointed overseers to maintain the route. The appointed overseer often lived on or close to the site and supervised about a mile or two of the road. The road also served the needs of local settlers who conducted business in Independence; it was a highway for the several hundred Mormons who crossed Jackson County to their land holdings in western Jackson county. David Pettigrew, who lived just north of the Independence-Westport Road Crossing in Section 13 around 1831 and 1832, said that the road was

"very much traveled" and there appeared to be a "great deal of business done in this section of the county." The Rockwells, Oren Rockwell and his son Oren Porter Rockwell, were the first to obtain a license from the county to operate a ferry at the Blue River Crossing, doing so in 1832. Isaac McCoy, a prominent Baptist missionary to the Indians, often used the road on his travels from Indian Territory (Kansas) to Independence and points east. County officials let a bridge contract, using State internal improvement funds, in 1834. They envisioned the road and the bridge to be of general utility to citizens of the county and to emigrants, mail facilities, and travelers in general. Even after the bridge was completed (1836), someone continued to operate a ferry at the crossing.

The period of significance for the Independence-Westport Road Crossing was certainly as early as 1827, and lasted through 1856, more or less. After the Civil War, Kansas City and Westport had developed into large commercial and industrial centers, larger than neighboring Independence. Other roads were developed in the area and the Independence-Westport Road and bridged crossing were used for local traffic in 1923 and perhaps later into the 1930s.

Although this study is focused on the Independence-Westport Road and Crossing as an alternate for the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails, the road and crossing were more important to those who operated the missions to the Indians; to the Mormons who settled briefly (1831-1833) in Jackson County; and to the settlers who bought land in western Jackson County.

The Independence-Westport Road Crossing in Jackson County, Missouri, appears to fulfill Criteria A of the National Register of Historic Places. First, it has potential significance as a regional and local transportation and trade route. And secondly, it was probably chosen by individuals and small parties as an alternate route on their to Santa Fe or Oregon. The other two crossings at 15th and 23rd streets are not significant as judged by Criteria A and the qualifications necessary for consideration for National Register of Historic Places designation.

## CONCLUSIONS

Nearly all the questions regarding the crossing, as presented in Chapter 2, have been answered by a combination of document research, on-the-ground viewing and photographic documentation. Questions answered within the text of this report are those regarding topography, historical trail chronology, preferred Santa Fe and Oregon trail routes, road improvements, existence of bridges, use of the Independence-Westport Road Crossing, development of the Blue River Valley, floods, river channel modification, changes to the Independence-Westport Road Crossing site and evaluation of the crossing as a National Register of Historic Places site.

Little information was found on Indian occupation in the immediate vicinity of the site and their use of routes through Jackson county. Also, the more recent history of the old road and crossing is not as precise as that during the historic period (1827-1856) and through the Civil War.

So much history was uncovered during the research. The Santa Fe and Oregon trails were just one of several major historically significant aspects. Mormon settlement and persecution, and the area's part in the Civil War are two very significant historical events. Research of Blue River improvements from 1900 to the present reflect changing views of city planners from idealistic beautification to more practical considerations of flood protection. The Independence-Westport Road Crossing, in its natural historic setting, is indeed an historical treasure in Jackson County, Missouri, and worthy of consideration for designation as a state and local historic site and possibly as a National Register of Historic Places site.

## ENDNOTES

1. U.S. Army Engineer District, *Final Environmental Statement, Blue River Projects* (Kansas City, Missouri (September 1974), pp.II-1 and 3.
2. U. S. Army, pp.II-3.
3. U. S. Army, p. II-43.
4. U. S. Army, p.4.
5. U. S. Army, pp. 5-6.
6. U. S. Army, p. 29.
7. United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service. *Comprehensive Management and Use Plan, Santa Fe National Historic Trail* (May 1990), p. 93.
8. Vol. II, opposite p. 760.
9. J. W. L. Slavens, *Illustrated Historical Atlas Map, Jackson County, Missouri* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Brink, McDonough & Co., 1877), Township 49, Ranges 32 and 33.
10. *History of Jackson County Missouri* (Kansas City Mo., Union Historical Co., 1881), Township 49, Range 33 West.
11. *Atlas of Kansas City and Vicinity* (Kansas City, Mo: Tuttle and Pick, Civil Engineers, 1900), Plate #38; *Kansas City Missouri, Parks* (1913), and *Kansas City, Missouri* (1936), both are in the Kansas City Public Library map collection.
12. *Kansas City Journal*, September 6, 1925.
13. Dean Earl Wood (Kansas City, Missouri: E. L. Mendenhall, 1951) p. 222.
14. Wood, pp. 218-219.
15. Gregory M. Franzwa (St. Louis: The Patrice Press, 1972), p.82.
16. Franzwa, p. 99.
17. NPS, *Santa Fe Historic Trail* (1990) p. 93.
18. Contract, Request #DACW41-93-Q-0006, issued by the USAED (Kansas City, Missouri, 1993), p.2.
19. *Westport, 1812-1912* (Kansas City, Mo.:Franklin Hudson Publishing Company, 1912), p. 20; *Land Entry Map of T49-R33W, Jackson County, Missouri*.
20. William E. Brown (St. Louis, Mo.:The Patrice Press, 1963), p. 82.

21. Jackson County Court Records, First Book of Minutes, pp.21, 23. The original is in the Jackson County Historical Society library in Independence, Missouri. Typed copies of the Minutes for the first book (Book 1) and the subsequent books of minutes used in this project are in the Records Storage Center, 1330 Cherry, Kansas City, Missouri.

22. Court Records (1827), p. 23; Original Land Entries for Township 49, Ranges 32 and 33 West, Jackson County, Missouri.

23. *Vol. II* (St. Louis: E. Charles, 1825), pp. 690, 692.

24. Court Records, Book 1 (1830), p.89.

25. U. S. Surveyor General, Missouri Plats, Field Notes for Jackson County, S12-T49-R33W, Vol. 296 (1826), p. 50. In State Archives, Jefferson City, Missouri.

26. Rollin J. Britton, "Mormon Land Titles," *Annals of Kansas City* (December 1922), 145-149; also Original Land Entries, Township 49, Ranges 32 and 33 West.

27. Ron Romig, Archivist, Reorganized Latter Day Saints Archives, Interview by Sondra Van Meter McCoy (May 13, 1993); Britton, pp.145-149; Original Land Entries, T49, R33W.

28. Court Records, Book 1 (Nov. 7, 1832), p. 180. Ronald Romig, RLDS, Interview, The name Oren is also spelled Orin and Aran. The spelling Oren was used in the *Mormon Redress Petitions*, pp.525-529. Apparently Oren P. Rockwell was illiterate for he marked his name with an X, i.e. Oren P. X Rockwell.

29. Court Records, Book 1 (Nov. 7, 1832)p. 180; Ronald Romig, RLDS.

30. Ronald Romig, RLDS.

31. David Pettigrew, NS2703, LDS Archives. Ronald Romig, archivist for the RLDS in Independence, Missouri, obtained the information from the LDS archives in Salt Lake City. Much of the information used in this section, except for county records, has been gathered by Mr. Romig.

32. Oren Porter Rockwell, Individual Affidavits, *Mormon Redress Petitions, Documents of the 1833-1838 Missouri Conflict*. ed. Clark V. Johnson, Vol. 16 (Provo, Utah:Brigham Young University, 1993), pp. 525-526.

33. Rockwell, *Redress*, pp. 525-526.

34. Rockwell, *Redress*, pp. 526-529.

35. Rockwell, *Redress*, pp. 528-529.

36. Court Records, Book 2 (May 5, 1834).

37. Court Records, Book 2 (May 2, 1836), pp. 174 and 236.

38. Howard N. Monnett, *Action Before Westport, 1864* (Kansas City, Mo. Westport Historical Society, 1964), p. 69.
39. *History of Jackson County Missouri* (1881), p.293.
40. Monnett, *Action*, pp. 71-72.
41. Sherry Lamb Schirmer and Richard D. McKinzie, *At the River's Bend, an Illustrated History of Kansas City, Independence and Jackson County* (Woodland Hills, Ca.: Windsor Publications, 1982), p.144.
42. *Kansas City Times*, November 28, 1928 and December 28, 1933.
43. USAED, *Environmental* (1974), preface and p. II-1.
44. *History of Jackson County* (1881), p.71.
45. *Field Notes*, Vol. 296 (1826), pp. 32-38.
46. U. S. Department of the Interior, NPS, *National Register Bulletin* (1982), p. 5.
47. U. S. Department of the Interior, NPS, *National Historic Trail, Oregon Trail, Comprehensive Management and Use Plan* (1981), p. 11.
48. *Santa Fe Historic Trail* (1990), p.16.
49. *National Register Bulletin* (1982), p. 44.
50. *National Register Bulletin* (1982), p. 44)
51. *National Register Bulletin* (1982), p.45.
52. *National Register Bulletin* (1982), p. 45.
53. *National Register Bulletin* (1982), pp. 7-8.

## GLOSSARY

**Alternate Routes:** a branch of the main route, a route different or in addition to the original route. This does not mean a parallel route, but rather a route which became several miles distant from the original or main route.

**Big Blue River:** the name commonly used for the Blue River in the 19th century. It was sometimes called the Big Blue Creek.

**Creek:** a small stream, as a branch of a river.

**Ford:** a shallow place in a stream that can be crossed by wading.

**Highway:** a main road such as one between towns; any main route.

**Historic Context:** "an organizing structure for interpreting history that groups information about historic properties that share a common theme, common geographical area, and a common time period." (*National Register Bulletin*, p. 53)

**Historic Integrity:** "The unimpaired ability of a property to convey its historical significance." (*National Register Bulletin*, p. 53)

**Lower Ford on the Big Blue:** the same as the Independence-Westport Road Crossing on the Blue River.

**National Register of Historic Places:** the official list of properties recognized as being significant in American history, architecture, etc., and worth preserving.

**Road:** an open way for passenger travel, usually wide enough for vehicles.

**Oxbow:** A U-shaped bend in a river; it resembles the U-shaped part of an ox yoke.

**Oregon Trail:** an emigrant route to the Oregon country, used mostly between 1842-1860.

**Santa Fe Trail:** commercial route to the West, used especially from 1821-1880. It started in Franklin, then Fort Osage, and by 1827, Independence, and later Westport and Kansas City, all in western Missouri.

**Trail:** a path or track made across an unsettled region, over rough country by the passage of men or animals.

**WPA:** Works Progress Administration established in 1935 by executive order to provide funds for non-federal projects, i. e. flood control, student aid and other projects.

## APPENDIX



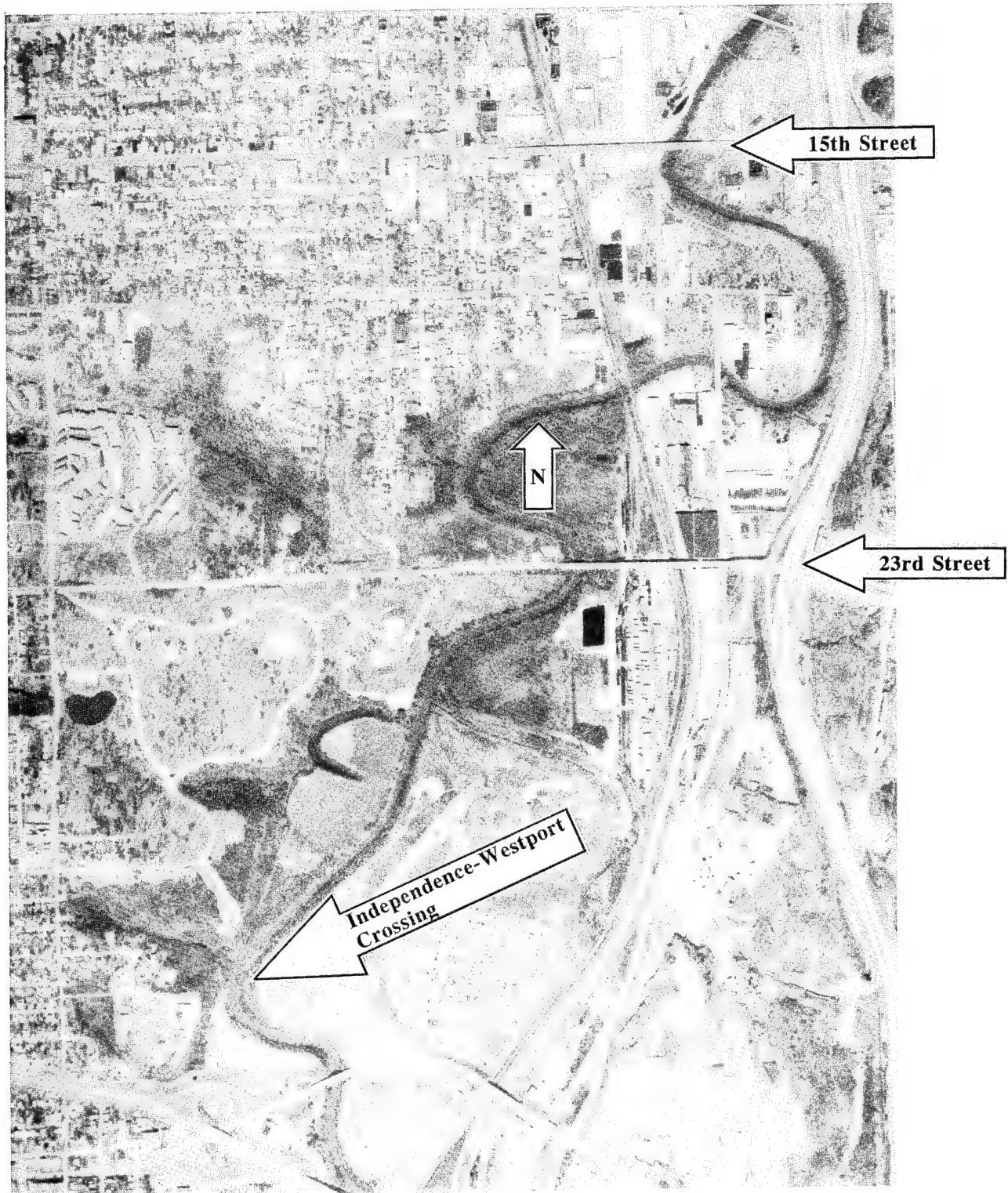


Figure 28. An August 27, 1979, aerial map of the Blue River, Kansas City, Missouri between U.S. Highway 70 to just above Independence Avenue. Channel straightening is most evident between the Independence-Westport Road Crossing site and 23rd street. The large ox-bow on the right and the smaller ox-bow on the left are still visible in the photo.



## Study Units and Watersheds

- PRINCIPAL DRAINAGE BASINS
- - - - WATERSHEDS

Figure 29. Missouri Watersheds

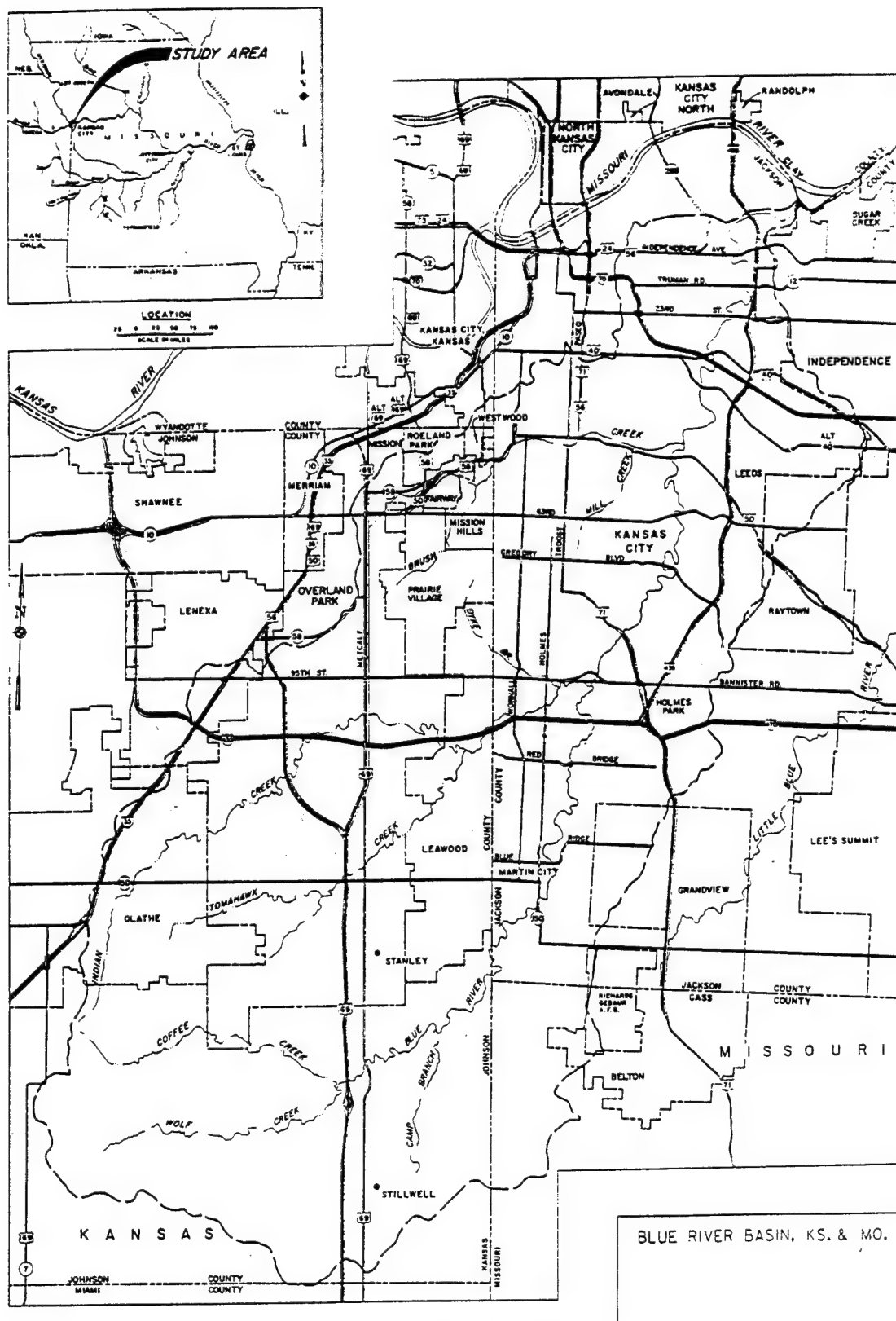


Figure 30. Blue River Basin

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